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STORIES BY LEAH BOBET / EUGIE FOSTER / RUDY RUCKER
JASON STODDARD / NEIL WILLIAMSON / GARETH L. POWELL

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AND JEFFREY FORD INTERVIEWED



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BLACK STATIC ISSUE 8 NOW!

PATRICK SAMPHIRE
AT THE GATES

LYNDA E. RUCKER

THESE THINGS WE HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN

Nickel & Dim

Steve Rothery

the Book of Ruth
Steven Pirie

TAKING ON LIFE
GARY FRY

Simon Clark
still blood crazy after all these years

NO, COME CLOSER THAN THAT

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Readers' Poll

This being the first issue of a new year, somewhere in here you'll find details of *Interzone's* annual readers' poll, in which you can vote for your favourite stories and illustrations of 2008. If you're new to the poll you might be surprised to learn that you can also vote against anything you didn't like. The story or illustration with the highest aggregate score is the winner. A bit harsh maybe, but that's the way *Interzone's* always done it. And don't worry if you haven't read all of the 2008 issues or are not actually a subscriber, your vote still counts. By all means let us know your general opinions of *Interzone's* year as well. We always look forward to reading these, and will publish as many as we can.

Martin McGrath has once again kindly volunteered to oversee the poll and will take votes and comments by post and by email and via the forum (ttapress.com/forum). Whichever method you choose please make sure your votes are in before 31 March, because the results will be published in issue 222.

Books

I'm glad to say that the books we published in 2008 were very well received. Paul Meloy's collection *Islington Crocodiles* sold out very quickly, so I'm sorry if you missed it. We *might* publish a very special, very limited hardback so do let us know if that's something you'd be interested in.

Andrew Humphrey's debut novel *Alison*, meanwhile, continues to pick up rave reviews – see the quotes reproduced on the inside back cover, for example. We still have copies of this left (print run was much higher) so please be tempted. It really is a brilliant, compelling piece of work.

We're still hoping to gradually increase the number of titles we publish, so please look out for some exciting announcements throughout the year.

Making the Most of the Exchange Rate

The poor old £ continues to take a battering, so for readers in the USA and Europe at least now is a very good time to be subscribing. Don't feel you have to wait for a subscription to expire before renewing either, go ahead and extend your subscription at any time, by any number of issues, and we'll take care of the rest.

If by the time you read this the poor old £ has had a dramatic recovery, sorry, just ignore this bit!



Langford attempts psionic contact with giant fungus

Publishers and Sinners. Signs of the end times: the major New York publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt instructed its editors to stop acquiring new manuscripts. (*Publishers Weekly*) VP Josef Blumenfeld soothingly added that this is 'not a permanent change.' Later, HMH downplayed this as merely a 'freeze-lite' ... 'blown out of proportion'.

Science Fantasy. Lisa Shaw of Century Radio Northeast: 'In which book is Room 101 a place to be feared?' Caller: '101 *Dalmatians*.' (*Private Eye*)

Paul Krugman, winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Economics, is an unashamed sf fan who says of Asimov's *Foundation*: 'It's somewhat embarrassing, but that's how I got into economics: I wanted to be a psychohistorian when I grew up, and economics was as close as I could get.' (*New York Times*) His 1978 paper 'The Theory of Interstellar Trade' is fondly remembered.

Alexei Sayle plugged his new novel – set partly in outer space – in a Radio 2 interview, and revealed the closely guarded secret: 'Science fiction is a kind of way to use magic.'

As Tabloids See Us. At last, even *Star Trek* transcends! 'The eagerly anticipated

Star Trek film is set to cast off the geeky associations of the sci-fi genre...' (*Daily Mail*) • An alleged villain's key defect: 'It was claimed that mother-of-seven Matthews faked Shannon's kidnap with sci-fi fantasist Michael Donovan to try to pocket a £50,000 reward from the media.' (*Daily Express*) My italics.

Magazine Scene. *Æon*, the on-line sf quarterly whose 15th issue appeared in August 2008, announced its closure for financial reasons.

We Are Everywhere. Michael Chabon explained the US Democratic National Convention as 'like the change that might occur between the first and second volumes of some spectacular science fiction fantasy epic. / At the end of the first volume, after bitter struggle, Obama had claimed the presumptive nomination. We Fremmen had done the impossible, against Sardaukar and imperial shock troops alike. We had brought water to Arrakis. Now the gathered tribes of the Democratic Party [...] had assembled on the plains of Denver to attempt to vanquish old Saruman McCain.' (*New York Review of Books*) At least it wasn't Voldemort.

John Norman plugs his new Gor novel: 'What man, in his deepest heart, does

not want to own a female, to have her for his own, utterly, as a devoted, passionate, vulnerable, mastered slave, and what woman, in her deepest heart, does not want to be so intensely desired, so unqualifiedly and fiercely desired, that nothing less than her absolute ownership will satisfy a male, her master?' Answers on a postcard, but not to me.

Raymond Briggs received the lifetime achievement award in the 14th Cartoon Art Trust Awards, presented in November.

Lexicongate. Is this the end? RDR Books withdrew the appeal against the US decision blocking publication of the *Harry Potter Lexicon* in its originally planned form. Instead Steve Vander Ark re-edited and expanded the book in the light of the judgment, with less paraphrase and more analysis. J.K. Rowling's PR agency made approving noises, and the *Lexicon* was scheduled for 12 January.

Kim Stanley Robinson was hailed as a Hero of the Environment, Leaders & Visionaries category, by *Time* magazine in October.

The Dead Past. The 1962 BBC internal report that inspired *Doctor Who* explains why Charles Eric Maine would never do for tv: '...too much a fantasist; he is obsessed with the Time theme, time-travel, fourth dimensions and so on – and we consider this indigestible stuff for the audience.' Other authors with thumbnail descriptions include Brian Aldiss, 'not a crank'; Arthur C. Clarke, 'a modest writer'; and C.S. Lewis, whose 'special religious preoccupations are boring and platitudinous.'

Novel Awards.

Gaylactic Spectrum: Ginn Hale, *Wicked Gentlemen*.

International Horror Guild: Dan Simmons, *The Terror*.

World Fantasy: Guy Gavriel Kay, *Ysabel*.

Thog's Masterclass.

Dept of Expansive Simile. 'Now at last Vera Verovna knew what she felt like: the mouse before the cat, the bee before the bear, the frog before the snake, the child before the dinosaur, the leaf before the wind, the beauty before the beast.' (Uri Geller, *Shawn*, 1990)

Philosophy Dept. 'We're all toenails on

our own bodies.' (*Ibid*) 'Time is flesh and flesh is gravity. Gravity is time and time is velocity.' (*Ibid*)

Dept of Mucosemiotics. 'There was a tense silence, then a hard voice literally spat into the room: "Yes!"' (A.E. van Vogt, *Masters of Time*, 1950)

Dept of Strange Endowment. 'She runs one hand along the lines of her body, her breasts like damp petals.' (Bruce Boston, *All The Clocks Are Melting*, 1984) 'Beneath the contour jewellery her breasts lay like eager snakes.' (J.G. Ballard, 'The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D', *F&SF*, 1967)

Personal Service Dept. 'The waitress had filled my coffee cup and taken my first swallow before the sheriff spoke.' (Charlaine Harris, *Grave Sight*, 2005)

R.I.P

Forrest J Ackerman (1916–2008), long-time US sf fan, editor and agent uniquely famous for *being* a fan and collector, died on 4 December; he was 92. Forry received the first Hugo presented, as '1 Fan Personality' in 1953; popularized (alas) the term 'sci-fi' in 1954; edited *Famous Monsters of Filmland* for 25 years from 1958; and was lavishly supportive to generations of sf fans.

James Cawthorn (1929–2008), UK artist, writer and critic who illustrated and reviewed for *New Worlds*, created the graphic novel adaptations of Michael Moorcock's *Stormbringer*, *The Jewel in the Skull* and others, and with Moorcock co-wrote *Fantasy: The 100 Best Books* (1988), died on 2 December aged 78. Moorcock writes: 'A third close friend died this year and I'm pretty devastated. Jim Cawthorn and I had worked together since the mid-fifties, from Burroughsania to *New Worlds* and on.'

George C. Chesbro (1940–2008), US author whose 'Mongo' dwarf-detective thrillers – beginning with *Shadow of a Broken Man* (1977) – frequently used sf themes, died on 18 November aged 68.

Michael Crichton (1942–2008), US physician, writer and film director best known for sf thrillers including *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *The Terminal Man* (1974) and *Jurassic Park* (1990) – all filmed – died from cancer on 4 November.



He was 66. Notable director credits are *Westworld* (1973), which Crichton also scripted, and *Coma* (1978). His novel *State of Fear* (2004) caused controversy with its environmentalist villains and, according to climate scientists, distortion of global warming research.

Richard K. Lyon (1933–2008), US author and research chemist whose 1973 debut story appeared in *Analog*, died on 21 November aged 74. His 1978–1981 'War of the Wizards' fantasy trilogy was written with Andrew J. Offutt.

Joseph McGee, US horror author whose small-press publications had attracted much attention since 2006, died on 27 November. He was reportedly just 23.

Ivan Southall, award-winning Australian children's author whose 'Simon Black' aviation/sf adventures appeared from 1950 to 1961, died on 15 November; he was 87.

William Wharton (Albert William du Aime, 1925–2008), US author best known for the magic-realist *Birdy* (1979), died on 29 October aged 82. His novel *Franky Furbo* (1989) is an outright though offbeat fantasy.

Peter Vansittart (1920–2008), UK historical novelist whose first book *I Am the World* (1942) was sf and who wrote several unusual timeslip fantasies, died on 4 October; he was 88.

JASON STODDARD

MONTE

ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL DRUMMOND



HEAD

My Saturday started with Antonio Moreno, screaming at me through my eyeset.

"Mike! Where'd the money go!" he yelled.

I groaned. I sat up. Full sun streamed through the grimy windows of my Silver Lake crackerbox, slashing the bedsheets white and hitting one absinthe-soaked retina like a billion photonic bullets. My other eye saw Antonio's avatar, realistically hyperventilating.

Nana mumbled and rolled over. Probably something about how stupid it was to sleep with your eyeset on.

"Hold on," I said. I made myself get out of bed. I stumbled into the hall and leaned against the wall, head down to stop the jackhammers. "What money?"

"Whaddya mean, what money, you dicksmoker..."

Ah. Fragments of thought pierced alcohol-stunned neurons. The money I'd given him to start his WeRU franchise.

Mom's money.

I eyeballed my account, and sure enough the money'd come back like a boomerang kid after college. It had a big red animated tag stuck to it: **FAILED TRANSACTION STIPULATIONS**. The happy bankbot started reading the fine print: *The source of these funds, Ms Mary Palmetto, has placed restrictions on their use -*

I eyeballed the MUTEBOT icon. "Antonio, you fucked up. I told you, you can't do certain things -"

"I did nothin!"

The bankbot showed a transaction where Antonio's WeRU franchise had thumbled a contract with a social propagation agency that was in direct competition with my mom's. I shot a cap of it to Antonio's eyeset. He stared at it for a moment, then gave me a big o-fuck expression.

"Kim," he said.

Stuff clicked. Kim was his high-Attention Index talent, daughter of a last-of-the-real-moviestars mother and first-of-the-MySpace-rockstars father. She was so massively dumb she made you think that all those parties the celebs went to were really a secret breeding program, designed to make them stupid enough to sign *any* contract after a few generations.

The bankbot fed me video: Kim and some saleshunk from PropPotential, full of silicone muscle. I shot it off to Antonio.

"Shit, shite, sorry," Antonio said. "No wonder -"

"Kill the contract. I'll send the money back. Then, for fuck's sake, don't let Kim thumb *anything*."

Antonio nodded. "Done."

You missed the chance to earn 10 goldendollars by referring your friend to Durian Bank, where your money works harder, MakeMoMoola whispered. *This has been -*

"Shut up!" I said. Fucking bot. I left it on because I liked to ignore it.

"What?" Antonio said.

"MakeMoMoola."

Antonio laughed. "You must have the worst ME on the planet."

Yeah, and Monetization Effectiveness times Attention Index is Your Total Value. I remembered the post-Big Dump vids. *We're saving the country*, Mom said, when she got up in front of the bloggers and press and talked about the brilliant potential of being a vector in the new propagation economy.

Not that it mattered to me. My ME was zero, but Mom's money would find me anywhere I went in the networked world.

I eyeballed Antonio's transfer and sent him his money back. "There. Money's back in your account."

You can earn 30 golden dollars for adding MoneyGuard to your friend's balance, which provides early warning of -

"Shut up!"

Antonio laughed again. "You know, we could set you up with a dozen WeRU reps, and have each

of them refuse MakeMoMoola's suggestions. Your monetization effectiveness would go straight in the toilet. I mean, like, worse than a janitor in Antarctica. Your mom would be pissed."

"Until Mom changed the restrictions on her funds, and all your accounts locked up."

"Think about it," Antonio said.

I just nodded.

"Hey, we're gettin together later tonight, just a thing, not a fling. Bring Nana?"

"Maybe." Another fucking place to be seen. Plenty of transactions to avoid. I could rec it and send it to Mom. *See, you can't suck me into your world. Not completely.*

"Come on."

"Maybe."

Antonio grinned. "See you there."

He disappeared and my eyeset went back to its default: screens of gritty Hollywood before they cleaned it up, before video made everything transparent, before the Big Dump. A time when money was dumb, and every conversation was just a conversation, not a chance to spread the latest hot product or service and make big bux, and people were still stupid enough to think bots were fun in a Max Headroom kinda way.

"Mike?" Nana Copan's voice, from the bedroom door. I looked up. My eyeset went to transparent mode for stereo vision. She wore a sheet wrapped around her slim shoulders, like a girl waiting to model for a lecherous old artist. She was six feet tall and one hundred twenty pounds, and she had that slow, languorous way of moving that turned the simplest clothing into a fashion show. I could watch her for hours. In bed, she was strange, a bundle of sticks jointed at odd angles, almost inhuman. Nana was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Problems?"

"Yeah. No. Nothing big."

"It's good that you help your friends," she said.

If this is a fine bedroom situation, you can earn up to two hundred new dollars by referring your partner to Optimum Stimulation, the parlor that preens! MakeMoMoola said.

I shook my head. I'd only known Nana for a couple of weeks, and I'd never really dug deep into her public profile. At first, I figured she was just another AI-craver, calculating how much attention she could get by being with the Son of the Mogul, the Man Who Said No. But now I didn't know.

"Come back to bed," she said. "I have to go soon."

Yes. She had to be seen. She had to wear the perfect outfit, blouses that were still on the upcurve, pants that hadn't been discovered by the masses, jewelry made by funky little local shops that were just starting with the word-of-mouth dance, purses and accessories she made herself for that ain't-never-seen-that-before factor. And Saturday was a big day, lots of tourists and people who still worked, out for a little fun and commerce.

I sighed, and went back to bed.

I liked my kitchen. It was on the shady side of the house, and almost none of the food talked to me. That was deliberate; I shopped in orbit, around the outside of the big box stores where they still sold stuff that was grown on plants and animals. Shit that had no tags telling me about the latest special offers, new

trial flavors, or anything like that. Every once in a while a fresh-tag'd go off and let me know I shouldn't eat something, but I did anyway.

The only thing talking to me was my car.

My battery pack is low, please drive me, my car said. I groaned and looked out the window at it, squinting in pain at the sun winking off the dirty chrome. It was a near-new '23 Lexus EX-700h, streaked with runnels of dust from sitting near an entire year in my driveway. I'd gotten tired of it whining about being abandoned, so I'd brought it home. Thanks, Mom.

So I muted the car, made my breakfast of wonderfully silent food, and surfed the answers sites, where billions of people had spent trillions of dollars to have both the simplest and most complex questions answered, sometimes hundreds of thousands of times. The sum total of human knowledge, free to be ignored by all of humanity. I wondered when someone would find all those unsolved math theorems and metaphysical questions answered, probably by some eight-year-old in Bulgaria.

I know I'm a fuckin waste. I know I could pick up, go down to Argentina or Patagonia or someplace where my mom wouldn't bother to go, get a job, and start over. But I'd never worked before, and I didn't know a shit thing about Argentina or Patagonia other than what I saw on the answers sites. For all I knew they weren't just fringe on the network side but maybe fringe on the social side, and I don't know what I'd do if they wanted me to worship the Catholics or anything like that. Yeah, I know, doesn't make sense. But I also wasn't going to use Mom's money to start my own business, cause that's what she wanted.

A knock on the door. "Mike! Mike Palmetto!" At the same time, my eyeset shrilled its special mom-alert noise, loud enough for me to remember what a stupid idea it was to go around with a movie theater and sound system attached to your head.

Shit. I leaned over to look down the hall, saw her mascara-ringed eyeball pressed up against the 50s-vintage bubbled glass on the front door.

No use hiding. I went and opened it. Mom walked right in, trailing angry perfume. She was slim and sculpted like only the best plastic surgeons could do, her fifty years held in a standoff somewhere just south of thirty. If it wasn't for her don't-give-a-shit-about-revenue fashion sense that included things like recycled grunge and even some 80s fab, she looked like someone I'd date.

"Your car messaged me," she said, holding out a little Sony handheld. Another old-person clue.

I nodded. "I know."

"You're neglecting it!"

"I don't need it."

"Then I'll take it back -" Mom snapped her trap shut, realizing that she had been outmaneuvered. I smiled.

"Why are you grinning?"

"Mom, what do you want?"

You missed a chance to refer parents to the SunShine Happy Home in northern Utah, worth 150 new dollars on signup, MakeMoMoola said.

A bit about Mom. I never knew my dad. I was conceived in the early hours of the morning on New Year's Day 2000, at a rave when Mom, out of her head on MDMA, was happily screwing to the end of a millennium that had not yet ended. Too early

for ubiquitous video then, but cross-references from early blog-posts and MySpace reminiscences of her friends told the story. No matter how much she wanted to paint it pretty, she didn't know half the guys she banged. Most of them faded away into the anonymity of people who suck at social networking. Some of them were still trackable, and there were nights I'd look at their mugs, side by side with my own, to see if there was any resemblance.

My mom was one of those people who, finding themselves pregnant, wigs the fuck out and decides to Do Something With Their Life and Make Things Right With God and Sacrifice Everything for the Baby and all that shit. She dropped the E, dropped the raves, and decided that making a whole shitload of money was the way to Paradise for her and her little baby Mike. She struck it big in the Web 2.0 scene, when she was running a whole bunch of entertainment fansites and scraping Google AdSense revenue to get by. I remember those days before the money, fuzzily, like one of those Vaseline-on-the-lens tricks. Hand-me-down clothes, a shitty formica table, the pissy-eucalyptus smell of too-well-lived-in apartment.

Then she got the idea. Pay the forum posters. Not a new idea, people'd been paying for blogs and shit for a long time, but when she started sharing revenue with the posters, her sites went nuts. And when people found out how much they could make, suddenly she had user-generated video and mashups of popular series that were sometimes better than the series themselves. Of course, that went nuts, and when they spread out to track referrals and conversions in a real-time basis...well, everyone knows Palmetoo, the network that monetized word of mouth. She got real pissed when everyone started stealing the idea, she had to get up in front of Congress once, when everyone was still trying to protect copyrights and get big companies to pay fifteen billion dollars for accidentally putting some suckass tard's face on a coffee can, and she went ballistic when PropPo brought out their MoneyWhispers bot, until she had MakeMoMoola.

But it didn't matter. She was rich.

I remember going from the apartment to a decent house in Westwood, then to a fucking mansion in Los Feliz, then to leveling a goddamn hilltop in the Hollywood Hills. But those memories are even fuzzier, a whole jar of Vaseline fuzzier, because what I really remember is sitting in her office, listening to her scream on the phone, or yell at me for ignoring my tutor, or yell at me for surfing to sites that weren't in the lesson plan, or yelling at me for missing an opportunity to spread the word and collect the dough, because I was Her Son, and people Knew Me, so my Attention Index was high.

"I have a new opportunity," she said, bringing me back to the present.

"You always have opportunities."

"This is big."

"Big, like someone wants to buy me to launch a new hairspray by putting a permanent tattoo all over my body?"

Using brand names like HardAsRock hairspray and Ouchless Tattoos could have earned you 2.5 yuan, said MakeMoMoola.

"Tattoos aren't permanent."

"You know what I mean."

Mom wrinkled her nose. "No. I don't know all the big details. It's not word of mouth, it's something else -"

"Honest work?" That was new.

"Everything's honest. Word of mouth powers our propagation economy. Nobody hides, everyone wins." Parroting her own marketing messages.

"But only the ones with the highest Attention Index can attend the big parties."

List of clubs with covers, valued from 0.5 yuan to 60 golden dollars. A list scrolled in my eyeset.

Mom grimaced. "And this is different than the old world how?"

"And, of course, the big corps always distribute seed products first to those with the highest AI and ME."

Mom clamped her mouth shut and glared. "We're meeting tonight at the King of Brentwood's house."

"Oh, joy."

"This is something you might want to be a part of. Unless you want to get, well, left behind."

There is a current bid of one hundred seventy five thousand new dollars for specific information on the King of Brentwood.

Hmm. That was interesting. I tagged it.

"All I've ever wanted is -"

Mom headed for the door. "Left behind, as in Big Dump left behind."

"What does that mean?"

She opened the door, then turned and pointed at my eyeset, "And don't bring that damn thing, unless you want it burned off your head."

"I -"

She stepped out and slammed the door in my face.

I went back to my breakfast. The last couple of minutes of my video feed from the eyeset was hash. The only record I had was pixellated crap from my old retina-cam, which Mom had installed when I was seventeen.

But why'd she hashed the video? Because she could? Or because it really was important?

I chased the link for info on the King of Brentwood, but it was one of those contact-us-for-more bullshit things. I sent a message from an old and disposable account, knowing it was probably just a phishing trick, old as the goddamn hills. Or Mom, just fucking with me.

I sighed, knowing I'd be there. Which was what she wanted in the first place.

One hundred seventy-five thousand new dollars isn't really that much. Only about fifty thousand golden dollars, or twenty thousand yuan. People are still nervous about dollars whether they were new dollars backed by the government or golden dollars backed by McDonalds, even though the Big Dump was almost a decade ago, and that other golden dollar died when they started doing the nanoseparation trick on seawater a few years ago. I thought my friend Grigory, who had a real job in customer service, summed it up best: So people in the States went from a 5,000 square foot house and two vacation homes and five timeshares and six cars in the garage to a single two thousand square foot house and one car, who cared, hell that was still livin large in Russia. A buncha whiny crybabies had to go without their Starbucks, was how I saw it.

But one hundred and seventy five thousand new dollars was

enough money for me to do some real deep trolling. Cause that money would be mine, no restrictions. I could start my own business with it, and watch it grow. The sweet, sweet image of Mom asking me for money floated for a moment in the big virtuality of my head.

I'd heard the King of Brentwood before. Some deep searches of the social media showed me a stocky Hispanic man with a buzz-cut and a perfectly trimmed goatee hamming it up at a martini bar. His real name was Fernando Padilla. Apparently he hadn't made his money in content or word of mouth, but actually had connections in manufacturing. Grown diamonds, shit like that, before it got easy and people started doing it in garages. He'd bought up most of Brentwood with his money after the Big Dump, hence the title.

The thing I know about people is, they don't change. If he was in manufacturing then he was probably in manufacturing now. I set some of the best free digger-bots on the memes of Fernando Padilla and manufacturing.

Some people ask why my mom's that way, and say, well, maybe she didn't have that great of an upbringing. Maybe grandma and grandpa, boomer images only fuzzily remembered, didn't give her the love she needed or wanted or deserved. But I don't know about the whole upbringing thing. I think sometimes people just *are*. I mean, why do I like super-thin women like Nana? She didn't look like my mother, and she certainly didn't look like my first love, a redhead who nailed me on Mom's office desk one day. There's nothing I can point to. It's something that just is. Something a salespitch can't change, your peers can't change, your family can't change.

Bonk! Helpful detextualized icons floated in my eyeset.

When you use diggers, you can see trends. Small blobs lead to larger blobs over time, connections multiply as you near present day.

But this was red and sketchy, like whole patches had been acid-etched out of the whole. Results like this made the tinfoil-hat ranters on the edge of the intarweb scream about how Google or Wal-Mart or McDonalds or the Omnipresent Yahoo or the government were diddlin the network, skewing it the way they wanted it to go. And it did look like results from a VirtUCLA class on proactive data security. But I didn't have the stomach to be a real academic, what with their segregated networks and love-and-hate relationship with the government and its New Dollar.

I had the bots go deeper, and connections emerged. They were stripped of brand and context and commerce, so I went to geography. Two pools glowed. One in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, where the real-time satellites showed water, water, and more water, and one in Vernon, part of LA's old gutted manufacturing core.

I thought of having Antonio send a WeRU agent down in my stead. But I knew that inpersons took a long time to train, longer than the bots that did most of WeRU's work.

But I could go to Vernon myself. Vernon meant taking the car, because none of the public or private transport companies were crazy enough to go down there. I wondered if Mom had done all this for the sole purpose of getting me to charge the batteries.

I got in the car, let it thank me, and fired it up. The windshield wipers screeched across the dust-streaked glass, pushing blue-

tinted mud off the windshield.

I told the car where I was going. After signing the disclaimer on the dash, it asked, *Would you like the highest revenue route, the most scenic route (as specified by the Los Angeles Tourist Board), or the fastest route based on traffic patterns?*

"Fastest."

Are you sure? This is a high-visibility vehicle. Any sales tied back to your appearance provide referral revenue of 4.75% -

"I'm sure."

The car lit a route on the dash. I let it drive by itself, and it did a pretty good job, only getting hung up at the Hollywood New Products Lottery, where people with low AI and ME clustered around the bright glass building, hoping to get a hot new item on its upswing.

It's not like they're starving, Mom's voice came. *All they gotta do is pick good stuff, get out, be seen. People'd kill to live like them, a hundred years ago.*

Yeah, and fuck you, Mom.

Vernon was, well, Vernon. Cracked streets strewn with trash, rusted cars huddling next to corrugated-steel warehouses gone out-of-square with age and quakes, crappy old tilt-up buildings, blank-faced and penal, some no more than burnt shells. Nothing moved. I could have been the last survivor of a nuclear war, or in one of those old-timey Twilight Zones where all the people just disappeared one day, poof, gone. People lived here, yeah. Google Earth's geonetworks showed little glowing specks here and there where people gathered, or burned trash, or did whatever they did down here. But from my POV, they were invisible.

The Lexus slowed to a crawl and said, *I must advise you that this area is not regularly patrolled, and I may be damaged if I am left unattended.*

I laughed. "Take me where I'm going."

You did not specify an address.

"Cruise, then."

There is no potential revenue here. I can recommend another cruise area.

"Just drive through the neighborhood, block by block."

I passed another one of those ancient tilt-up buildings. A flash of sunlight on chrome caught my eye.

I made the Lexus stop and go back. Behind the rusted chain-link was an alley that led to the back of the building. I could just see a row of shiny new cars parked in back, Caddies and Benzes and Lexii. The location corresponded reasonably well to the geotarget for the King of Brentwood's Vernon ops, but the peak was so mushy I couldn't be certain. I hesitated. I'd done my share of urban exploration as a kid, but this was different. I could be walking in a labor farm or something really nasty like a tobacco warehouse.

Parking here is inadvisable, the car said. I have many high-revenue parking areas for you to consider.

I nodded. Yeah, I could walk away. I could go to the meeting tonight and hear the pitch, and have Mom talk me into signing up, because it was the safe thing, it was what I should do, because I could always give that money to my friends (but not the people at the lottery), because I was the visible rift in her perfect life, because I made people think about this whole propagation thing (because I was too scared to do anything else).

I parked the car down the block a bit, signed off the three

disclaimers that it showed on the screen, and headed around to the end of the block, where a wider alleyway once served as a thoroughfare for trucks. Now, it was a parking lot for abandoned cars too dumb to call home, a place where semi-trailers had been turned into low-rent apartments with stolen windows and doors from Home Depots. Again, I saw nobody, but I felt them watching. I wished I had my old concrete camo from the urban exploration days, but I didn't look too out of place in faded old Chinese Levis and a Tommy's T-shirt. And my ThugAlert bot hadn't beeped, so it wasn't like there were subtextuals I wasn't seeing.

Near the parked-up building, the mystery got bigger, because in addition to the high-buck cars, there were also some medium-buck Chevis and Toyotas. Nothing really old or ratty, though, not like you'd expect at a bootheel meeting. It looked a bit like parking lot pics of old, back when everyone came to work in one place instead of doing it in virtuality. Which was weird. People didn't gather for business in person unless it was something damn important.

I skirted the cars and went to the far side, where big steel louvers faced skyward, starting about twelve feet off the ground. A strange smell wafted out from them, like hot metal. Back here, the building was cinderblock, not tilt-up.

Chasing my first piece of ass served me well, cause she'd been a freeclimber, and shitting bricks scampering up buildings had been my way into her drawers. As well as a few good views. I kicked off my shoes, dug in and pulled myself up, peeling fingernails in the process. I grabbed onto the louvers as I heard voices footsteps crunching on concrete, and muffled voices coming from around the corner of the building.

Ah, shit.

Well, I'd gotten there, and I wasn't just gonna let it go. Hot air flowed out of the louvers, carrying the burned-metal smell. I looked down into the building. It was dim-lit, like an old-time factory, but I was able to see glints of light off a pile of shiny high-dollar eyesets, haphazardly stacked in a bin. Then my eyes adjusted, and I saw: a row of plastic tanks stretching to the opposite side of the building; several men looking down at the churning surface of one of the tanks, sweating and talking in low tones. Another stood over the last tank, picking eyesets like the ones in the bin off plastic track that emerged from the tank. I followed the line of plastic track, which dipped into every tank in turn. At the beginning of the line, there was nothing on the track. In the middle, a spindly multicolored thing. At the end, eyesets.

"There he is!" from the far side of the building. There was the slap of feet on concrete, running.

I tore my eyes away from the factory and looked. Two men wearing security uniforms and binocular eyesets ran towards me. I dropped to the ground and ran.

Fucksticks. I should've known. As soon as the realtime sats and their own cameras saw me, I was cooked. Whatever they were doing, they weren't playing. I was surprised my eyeset hadn't blurted out an alarm.

"Stop!" one of the men yelled. I ran faster, threw myself at the rusted chainlink, scampered over the top. It was only another half block to the car. If they didn't have someone there waiting for me.

I expected to hear bodies hit the fence, and the fence itself sing

that rattly chainlink tune, but their footsteps slapped to a stop. A glance back showed them looking at each other and nodding, like they were getting new instructions via their eyesets.

Which meant they were probably at the car. I ran faster, preparing to jog at the first sign of security.

But there was nobody there. I got in the car, signed the disclaimers as fast as I could, and floorboarded it out of there.

You are driving illegally and erratically. If you continue to do so, I will have to inform the Greater Los Angeles Police Department.

"Shut up!" I said, but I backed off the throttle. In the rearcam, there was nothing. I shook my head. They should've chased me. But Vernon was as quiet as when I first arrived.

After a few minutes, I let the car drive itself. I eyeballed my eyeset back through the last ten minutes of my life, but there was nothing there. No video. No audio. Not hashed, but simply wiped clean. The log showed it going offline right before I pulled up in front of the warehouse. Clean stuff too, not even a trace of hash. Something had gotten into the eyeset and convinced me it was running, while I'd been as alone as someone from the twentieth century back there. Slick. And a bit scary. I didn't want to know what kind of system could reach out, find my eyeset type, talk to its system, and co-opt it so smoothly. It made my mom's little hashy tricks look like something out of the Web 1.0 days.

Then my eyeset did its little shiver and dance thing that said someone I didn't know was plucking at my attention. The preview text showed: Fernando Padilla, President, CEO, and Chairman of the Board, Padilla Enterprises.

I thought for a minute about fucking him off. Then I sighed and eyeballed the connection open. The King of Brentwood was standing there, looking at me. Probably real, too, cause they never got the avatars quite fractal enough to be real. And the background was a chaos of generic Expensive House, not cool virtual stuff that showed you had a lot of sim-money. And nobody would design an avatar without any hint of a neck, would they? His left cheek tic'd slightly, as if he was very, very mad.

"It's good to see that Mary Palmetto's son can show some initiative," he said.

"What do you want?"

The King pursed his lips, as if this was a question for the ages, like what the real contents of the Library of Alexandria were. "Me? I want nothing. I am, in fact, extremely uninterested in having you be part of any venture. But your mother is persuasive."

"So take your own advice."

You missed a chance to suggest Happi Mind psychological services, which provide the top satisfaction improvement rating without drugs, MakeMoMoola said.

"Ah, but she would be so unhappy. And I sincerely want our union to continue." A broad smile transmitted thoughts I didn't want to analyze. "It may be better if the three of us met now, rather than waiting until the evening."

"I'm not interested."

"At this point, I don't think that matters."

"What if I let the police know what I saw?"

Greater Los Angeles Enforcement is offering a 10% referral incentive for successfully prosecuted cases, MakeMoMoola said.

A laugh. "And what did you see? You certainly have no record of it. Unsubstantiated rants are rather less than compelling, Mr Palmetto."

I cursed. It was a goddamn Chinese finger puzzle, a fucking career in the mafia. I could dream about getting out, but it just wasntgonnahappen.com.

But. Wait.

I did the think-and-blink trick and ran my retinal cam back through the last few minutes. Blurred, pixellated video and echoey audio showed the interior of the factory once again. If that really was what it was. So I had something. Even if I didn't really know what it was.

It was my turn to grin. "I'll think about it," I said. "But I'm busy right now, and I'm already booked for tonight."

You missed a chance to be in two places at once with WeRU, the only service where We Are You!

The King's expression went stormy. I eyeballed him onto a notify-and-hold list, and cut the connection.

Another glance behind me. Still no cars. I felt good about tweaking the King, but there were still way too many questions. Like what I'd gotten myself into.

And what, exactly, had I seen?

I used a tracer and found Nana in Santa Monica, so I let the Lexus find the 10 and hoof us out there. It lingered next to cheap cars for a while, slowing the drive. I went through its menu and found a form for Revenue Abstention (Experimental or Religious Economies Contract), and signed it off. After that, the drive went faster.

Halfway to Santa Monica, my eyeset opaqued itself. It showed no image, no sound, no video, no friend info, just a short text message:

For you, information about the King is now worth five hundred thousand new dollars.

Truth = Money

And one of those synthetic reply-to addresses, those ones that look like an old-fashioned password. Nothing else.

Shit. Shit shit. What was this? They'd barged into my eyeset like one of my bestest friends. A quick digger search showed no correlation with the King.

Whoever it was, they'd co-opted my eyeset enough to let them just barge in. That was scary. It meant I was being targeted, not as an impersonal number in the dance of propagation and transaction, but as a person.

Which wasn't supposed to happen. The financial nets didn't talk to the media nets, the referral and monetization nets were separate, and the academic nets were a whole nother thing, and on and on. Which was good. If they all talked, what a clusterfuck. Some geek god with too much time on his hands could know anything and everything, and find a way to get enough power to screw everyone.

My eyeset display changed:

Specific information may be worth up to seven hundred fifty thousand new dollars, Mr Palmetto.

Truth = Money

Oh, that was bad. That was ugly. For the first time, I felt my stomach roll over in fear.

And I still had no idea what I'd seen. I thought about transferring the video from my internal network to the eyeset for enhancement, but it'd probably be best to leave it in the relative obscurity of outdated networking protocols for the moment.

But I needed to see it. I needed somewhere secure, where I could run it through all the latest routines, pull some voices out of the mumbles, get it cleaned and polished so I could figure out just what the heck I'd actually seen.

Grigory.

Of course. Grigory Gavrillov. He worked customer service for some new happypill, and health stuff was the last frontier of security. If academics were apart, the pharmas were on Pluto. Every politician that had tried to open the health data, even anonymized, had committed career suicide.

I cleared the scary message and logged onto Pfizer's virtuality, where dancing red smartpills promised me a 2.0-level mind. I waited for the commercial and affiliate offers to end, and requested Grigory by name.

I got shuttled into someone's idea of the perfect waiting space, a happy little park where kids played on the grass, and beautifully aged grandmothers and grandfathers fed pigeons from park benches. I almost didn't notice when the clouds rearranged themselves into skywriting that indicated I could step through into Grigory's office.

And it was a nice office. They had Grigory sitting in a burgundy tuck-and-roll leather office chair, complete with shiny little brass buttons. His desk was a huge expanse of dark wood. Behind him were old-fashioned medical tomes, and from his neck hung (of course) a stethoscope. The full cliché, but probably what people wanted to see when they were mortgaging a percentage of their total lifetime value to a drug that promised true happiness in all the ways humans could measure.

"How may I help you, Mr - " Grigory said. Then he saw my avatar. His mouth fell open. "Mike! What are you doing here?"

"Looking for relief from the woes of my life," I said.

"Mike - "

"No, seriously. Look, these convos are secure, right?"

"Tight as a gnat's butt."

I laughed. "Are you speaking Russian?"

"Yeah, why?"

"The translations are getting better."

"Oh. But Mike, you gotta have a real reason to be here. I can get in trouble."

"I thought you said it was secure."

"Yeah, but they context-sweep it, just to make sure we aren't signing up eight-year-olds for happypills."

"I'm thinking of using YouBetta, and I'm afraid it might conflict with the software and wetware mods I have."

"Wetware mods?"

"A retinal cam my mom installed, years back."

Grigory just looked blank. "I - "

"I'd like to ensure the quality of capture. If you'd take a look at some current video, you can see what I mean."

Grigory's eyes widened, and he nodded. I knew somewhere halfway around the world, Grigory sat in his home office, connected up with five hundred other sacks who consented to have their interpersonal relations mediated to improve office interaction, but he could have been real. "Show me."

"How secure is your connection?"

"I'll set it for maximum encryption."

"How secure is that?"

"We could run the president's orgy videos through here, and

nobody'd twitch."

I sighed. I had to take a chance. I wrapped up the video and shot it down to him, together with a quick text summary of what led up to it, and my questions.

"I'll contact you back," Grigory said, and signed off.

When I got to Santa Monica, I ditched the Lexus in a 2nd Street parking structure and went up to the 3rd Street Promenade. The sky was canopied with aerostat movies, from big-dollar releases to pirate home-brew stuff, all fishing for eyeballs. Shops carrying AUTHENTIC HAND-MADE TODAY stuff never before propagated vied for customers with screens and displays and lightshows of their own. MakeMoMoola chanted revenue opportunities breathlessly until it decided there were too many offers to deliver via voice, and switched to a text scroll at the edge of my field of vision.

"Great day for a noovie," said a random guy wearing an animated shirt for Gingham Shorts, a Mischival. I eyeballed my standard fuck-off script, showing my transaction record. He frowned and steered away.

The shops were hopping with high-Attention Index talent. Apple was showing its new dynamic stereo eyeset that you could wear all the time, or use in overlay or immersive mode. They had a big smartfog projection out in front of their store showing a kid interacting with the ghosts of a popular netshow sitcom. Not a new idea, but with good stereoptic overlay the remains of the entertainment networks might keep people in their worlds for a few more years. I'd never seen the appeal of talking to imaginary friends in real life, even if your conversation did end up influencing the character arc. Of course, there were also hangers-on wearing their new Apple eyesets, hoping to get counted as part of the show-stream revenue, and griefers with competing products, trying to get in the way of the most visible personal and public cameras.

Along the edges of the crowd were the fringies, people who'd given up even on the new products lotteries and the see-and-be-seen free-for-all parties. Probably down from the hills, where a foodplant and a trailer and a few solar panels kept them in better-than-20th-Century comfort. They wore boring clothes in plain colors, jeans that had never seen a designer's input or a distresser's touch, T-shirts from product launches months old. Some of them held signs: RESTORE THE SOCIAL CURRENCY! CONVERSATION, NOT CONVERSION! PERSONALITY, NOT PROPAGATION!

The locator showed Nana somewhere nearby, but I didn't see her in the crowd. I hung back at the edges, not yet ready to call her.

So I paced, and waited for Grigory. A bunch of Midwesterners were doing old-style attention things, wearing costumes and performing a skit my eyeset identified as a variation on *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Old-style Hollywood stuff, from the days when obscurity was your only enemy. Now it was just seamlessly weighed, rated, and rejected before ever reaching a host dumb enough to propagate it. I wondered how bad their bots were. If they didn't stop them from doing stupid stunts like that, they must be very out of date.

Your current Attention Index is very high, MakeMoMoola said. There are a number of HAND-MADE TODAY offers that would pay five to seven times the clothing investment over the course of a day, based on your AI.

I started. I'd always had a high AI, being the Son of the Mogul and all, but I'd never had an AI high enough to pay back major purchases from simple exposure. That was serious celeb territory.

I looked at the charts in the eyeset, and whistled. Three of the big six social intermediaries had hooked my real-time feed. Over seventy major lifecasters, commentators, and bloggers were following my movements. There was speculation about missing time in my personal video file (the damn factory) and a conversation they sniffed as fake (Mom), a recent trip to the Pfizer virtuality (shit), and the rumored tender of large monetized offers (shit, shit, shit!).

I resisted the urge to duck into a dark shop; the social intermediaries would know I knew, and the game would be over. My story would either flame up or flame out. I wouldn't have any control over it. Until I figured it out, better to have them watching. Just in case.

"Mike?" Nana's voice, beside me.

I jumped and whirled to look. I'd almost walked right past her. She was standing with two other men in trying-too-hard clothes, who looked me up and down in that universal competitive once-over. They held big wireless-controlled planes and wore VR goggles pushed up on their heads, with controllers slung at their sides. An old trick, teaching the tourists to fly the planes and look around as if they were the pilots. Old but fun. Except there weren't any tourists around.

And Nana was looking at me with a funny expression on her face, as if she was surprised to see me.

"What's going on?" Nana asked. "Your AI is –"

I took her hand and dragged her out of voice-reconstruction range. "Everything's been weird since Mom came by this morning."

"Your mom came to the house?"

"Yeah. She has an offer I can't refuse. Except –"

"Refuse it!" Nana said. Then her face crumpled into a mask of confusion. "I mean, you aren't going to take it, are you? I know you have other offers. It's all over the intermediaries."

Fuck. My whole life laid out. I shook my head.

"Now you have a choice, don't you?"

I felt my face grow hot. "But... I went to this factory, and I... ah, shit, everything's just out of whack."

Nana's face did that eye-squinting, frown-pulling trick I knew all too well. I'd seen it before. Every time a girlfriend figured me out. Every time I had to look her in the eye and say, *Yes, that's right. I'm not a rebel. Not really.*

But she didn't explode. She didn't tell me to fuck off. She just looked at me with those big gray-blue eyes, like she was waiting. Like she had a bet. Which wasn't impossible. Bookies'll put odds on anything.

"Are you trying to profit off me?" I asked.

Nana's mouth fell open, and her eyes widened. She shook her head. "No, not that, not that at all! I wouldn't!"

Yeah, right. Today was the day everybody wanted a piece of me.

Nana grabbed my arm. "Mike, please."

My eyeset shrilled. It was Grigory. But behind him there was no Pfizer virtuality. Hell, there was no avatar, no sound, just a text link.

You are in deep trouble, my friend, the message said.

"I can explain," Nana said.

I shook off her hand. "I have a call."

"Mike, damnit!"

"Hold on!"

Nana gave me one last pissed, confused look and stomped away.

"Grigory, I'm here," I said.

Just eyeball, Grigory texted. *Less data, more security.*

Sorry. I. What happened? Why are you calling direct? Isn't Pfizer more secure?

No. Grigory shot me a shortcut to the Pfizer virtuality. But there was no office, no waiting-room, not even a park. Just a simple text screen that read:

Pfizer druglife is down for maintenance.

Please check back soon!

We look forward to improving your life.

Maintenance? Drug virtualities didn't go down for maintenance. The legal ramifications were ridiculously huge. They were asking for a class-action lawsuit that might take out the company overnight.

If I was messing with something that could take down a drug virtuality... I felt beads of sweat appear on my forehead, cluster, and run down my cheeks.

What happened? I eyeballed.

Someone is really, really interested in that video of yours.

Do you have it?

No.

Did you see it?

I think you stumbled on a mature nanofabricating environment.

So?

So, we're not supposed to have mature nanotech yet. At least not the magic stuff, where you can grow things in vats.

I don't get it.

Gods, you really don't understand. Do you know how modern factories work?

I nodded. I'd gotten a taste of it during my King of Brentwood research. They were very automated, and damn smart. Modern factories were hooked into the consumer networks to judge preferences and tweak designs before release, and they automatically factored in historic word-of-mouth marketing results to determine the optimum build quantity and number of variations. Really, really boring stuff, where people got excited when they had a two-percent increase in efficiency, or a ten-percent better algorithm for figuring production numbers.

Yeah, a bit, I eyeballed.

So you know they aren't magic. Mature nanofabricating is magic. Many orders of magnitude more flexibility, and maybe an order of magnitude cheaper. You could have infinite variations, and you could do it a lot cheaper.

So?

So there's the problem. Modern factories are good enough that we're already in a de facto post-scarcity economy.

I nodded. I'd heard it before. Even after the Big Dump, we lived better than most people did fifty years ago. Hell, goods and services had become cheap enough that most people could live just by being vectors, by spreading the word and collecting the dough.

Grigory continued: *What happens if you can make stuff so cheap that nothing's worth anything anymore? Another Big Dump? Worse? Do we all go a little crazy? Do we end up praying to concrete tilt-ups full of gray goo?*

It made absolutely no sense, and it made total sense. My mom and the fucking King of Brentwood, using a buncha world-changing tech just for a buck.

But where'd they get it? I eyeballed.

There's always rumors about forbidden tech, Grigory sent. *The hundred-mile-per-gallon carburetor, the 1000-mile battery, cold fusion.*

I don't know what you're talking about.

So maybe nanotech's here, but most people are smart enough not to deploy it. Maybe it's sitting in a company basement under a tarp -

Grigory's text stopped scrolling, and his photo disappeared from the IM.

Grigory? I eyeballed.

My eyeset blanked and showed:

There's only one person you need to talk to, Mr Palmetto. One million new dollars are waiting for you.

Truth = Money

Pieces fell into place like Tetris blocks. Forbidden tech, hidden in basements. These fucking weird offers. Clunk, clunk, a perfect fit.

"Mr Palmetto?" A voice, behind me.

I turned to see spooks. Not old-timey Agents or Men in Black or any of that crap, just two guys dressed in calculatedly non-offensive T-shirts and jeans so carefully tattered that they might as well have used an algorithm. California-blond hair, surfers' physiques - they were trying just a little too hard.

I looked around, wondering if I could make it to the car before these guys grabbed me.

"Mr Palmetto," the one said again, his voice stoner-casual. "We just want to talk."

I backed towards the crowd. "Yeah, I bet you say that to all the boys."

"We're here to make you an offer." The non-talker moved to get between me and the crowd.

"Who are you?"

Big toothy grin, realistically yellowed. "Friends."

"I doubt -"

There was a whistling behind me. The lead spook's eyes widened. Then I felt something pass over my shoulder in a rush of wind. A wireless plane crashed nose-first into one of the spook's faces, its microturbines screaming. He yelled, and the other spook turned to look at him.

I ran. I heard a curse and the sound of feet behind me. I expected to feel someone grab my collar and haul me up short. But there was another whine of microturbines and a crash, and I heard a heavy body bouncing off pavement.

Nana's avatar appeared in my eyeset. "Say thank you," she said.

"The car's in second street parking."

"And?"

"Thank you!"

Her avatar smiled. "Meet you there."

We met at the Lexus and screeched out of the lot on manual, with the car yelling that it was going to call the police. I swung

us inland on Wilshire, where there were lots of roads, lots of options.

"What's going on?" I asked Nana.

"They were blanks," she said. "Came into the crowd, headed straight for you."

"No. Not them. You."

Nana looked away. I could see her lips pressed tight, reflected in the window. "I've been studying you."

"You've been what?"

She turned back to me. Her eyes were bright, threatening tears. "I'm in the graduate program at UCLA. We're studying how people set different levels of satiety."

There is still a chance to mention USC's new GradSpeed program, which accelerates – MakeMoMoola began.

Oh fuck that. I was so done. I eyeballed the bot off. The words died in my ear, and a panicked little icon danced in front of my eyes, warning of financial ruin.

My words came choppy: "Nana. Like. WTF?"

"You and your mother are the perfect case study. You could be part of her company. You could be running it. And yet you reject, well..." Nana trailed off, looking embarrassed.

Almost everything, I thought. *But not everything*.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Your level of satiety is different. We're getting close to figuring out the triggers. If we can nail them, then maybe we can move to a more rational society –"

"I was a science project?"

"Not really –"

"A fucking science project!"

"Mike –"

"All those weird little questions. What, do you have an implant whispering in your ear, telling you what to ask? Do you stay up at night to report back to your professors?"

Nana squeezed her eyes shut. "Mike, I care about you."

"Like a Petri dish? Like a sample?"

Nana said nothing for a long time. Her shoulders shook, but she made no noise.

We drove for a while in silence. I wanted to stop the car and tell her to get out. I wanted to go home. I wanted to forget about the entire day. First Mom, then the King, now the spooks. It was too much.

"Okay," she said, sniffing, looking up at me. "Full disclosure. I'll give you all the fine print. Yeah, there was money in it. Studying you, I mean. Motivation and satiety research is best-funded by the feds. But it was for the school. The money would be for the school. So. I'm sorry."

I just looked at her.

"I should have told you. When I started liking you."

She wasn't faking.

And that was when I saw it, all of it, the whole big ball that monetized propagation had gotten us into. Because we could have met, and we could have just been a couple, but instead there were hidden agendas and money maneuvering and crap. In that moment, I could have flown to Patagonia or Argentina or wherever, or just went somewhere and planted my house and food and been a rebel.

She told you all this. She didn't have to. And that was honest. That was human.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Nana sniffled, but said nothing. Her eyes darted to and fro, as if looking for a point on my face she couldn't quite locate.

"I believe you."

"Really?" Nana gave me a thin smile.

"Now I gotta figure out what I've gotten myself into."

"Those guys back there, the surfers, they were government. We get them at the school, snooping around. Campus security throws them out. It isn't part of the contract. They're just like the ones that picked up my ex for drugs."

"Your ex?"

"Long story. You know, drugs are OK, but they don't want you to know how they're made, or how they get here."

Making the world safe for hypocrisy, I thought. It made sense. First carburetors, then drugs, now nanotech. Why not? The beloved government, keeping the economy safe for the masses. Except for little things like the Big Dump.

"I think they're with the guys who're making me the big offers."

"Why? What happened?"

"I saw something I shouldn't have," I said. I told her about my afternoon, the call from the King, and the anonymous offers on my eyeset.

But, before I got to Grigory, Nana's eyes got big. "It's the nanotech thing," she said.

"What?"

"UCLA. Go to UCLA."

"What?"

"Just drive!"

I told the Lexus to take us to UCLA. It sounded very happy as it announced that was a very high probability-of-revenue area.

I wanted to beat the dashboard with my fists.

At UCLA, men in white coveralls were cleaning a big activeink banner for Virtual Sex Paradise off Royce Hall. Edges of it still moaned and cycled through bits of garishly-colored avatar sex. The network informed my eyeset that:

Campus residents, class attendees and guests are prohibited from verbal product meme propagation, except occasionally in casual environments. Active-display clothing cannot cycle more than once every five seconds, and sound must be muted. Have an excellent day at UCLA, your Home of Higher Learning in Los Angeles.

Nana took me to her professor, who sat in an office covered wall-to-wall in old-fashioned books. It looked to be a statement and not a Luddite form of reference, since the books were all covered with a thick layer of dust. The fiftiesish man looked first terrified, then surprised, then pissed. My eyeset identified him as Professor Rich Esparza, and listed his sponsors, which included the Center for Social Engineering and Pfizer and the government's Taxman arm. Nana let him fume about how she was ruining the experiment, before giving him a quick rundown of what I'd been through.

Before Dr Esparza could react, though, another man poked his head through the door. He was young and bald, like the fashion of twenty years ago, and he blinked at us through a heavy binocular eyeset. My eyeset identified him as Creepy Non-Entity. There was an old-fashioned INTEL INSIDE logo animating where his sponsor list should be.

"You're the kid who ran into the nano?" he asked me.

"Seems that way."

"Mike, this is Dr Peterson from NanoEngineering," Nana said.

Dr Peterson nodded. "Yeah, yeah, they call that nanotech, growing a few diamonds, separating a little seawater, doing the Little Shop of Horrors bit on the plants." He put his arm around me. "But we know there's more, don't we?"

"I, uh, guess so."

"We would've helped the government manage the transition, but they're so shortsighted, they just don't get it."

"You have mature nanofabricating, is what you're saying?" I said.

Dr Peterson laughed. "More than that. Hell, we could probably take out the planet –"

"Peterson!" Dr Esparza snapped. "This isn't a joke. I have an experiment in ruins!"

Dr Peterson laughed and went to hug Dr Esparza. "Oh, and that's so terrible, you'll never find another subject, will you?"

Esparza shook him off. "Stop making fun of me."

"I'm not." Peterson went and sat on the edge of the desk and looked at me. I saw data scroll in his eyeset. "Problem is, you're caught in the middle of all this, Mr Palmetto. Isn't that right?"

"Don't call me that name!"

Peterson looked at Dr Esparza. "There. There's some data for you."

Peterson turned back to me. "And this is serious. The monetized propagation culture has put our research back half a decade. Nobody wants to hide away. But what do you have to do to do serious research? Hide away. Same thing you have to do for art, or writing, or anything else we consider of value. And now your mother and a fireplug with a third-grade education want to use mature nanofabricating to enhance their personal fortunes. Oh brave new world, and all that."

"What do I do?" I asked him.

As if on cue, my eyeset opaqued.

We have one million new dollars waiting for you, Mr Palmetto. We think you will believe this much better than any alternative.

Truth = Money

I told them about the message. Dr Peterson smiled. "See what they want," he said.

I sent a quick message for the reply-to address:

Okay, let's talk. How does this work?

The response was almost instantaneous. A crappy avatar appeared in my eyeset, something out of a ten-year-old off-the-shelf site. I mean, black suit, slicked-back hair. Of course it had to be the government.

"Have you decided to accept our offer?" it asked.

"Are you a bot or a person?" I said.

"Does it matter?" The avatar's environment expanded to fit my field of view. He sat in a fakey-looking corner office overseeing generic cityscape.

"Of course it matters. If you are who I think you are, why don't you just make Mr Padilla disappear?" A quick smile from the cheap avatar. "There are ramifications. Especially with someone so highly placed."

Meaning, governments aren't immune to class-action lawsuits, either, as George Montrachet vs the FDA proved a decade or so ago. Or they were afraid of the King's Chinese buddies. Or any one of his other cat's-cradle of connections.

"What do you want from me?"

"Our offer is one million new dollars for a strip of the local memory of your eyeset for the last twenty-four hours, as well as the video you have stored in your head."

Fuck. Fuck fuck. They knew about the video. Of course, they'd taken down Pfizer's virtuality to get at it.

"How would it go down? If I accept?"

"We'd take your eyeset and provide you with a replacement. For your internal memory, we'd query the logs to make sure you didn't upload it beyond Pfizer, then we'd have it surgically removed. A fifteen-minute procedure, in and out."

"And of course you'll let me have independent observers and transmit live video of the procedure?"

A thin-lipped smile. "You can trust us."

And it would be so easy, and so much safer, if I had a little accident.

And even if I didn't, what would I get? A few bucks, a pat on the head, and a thank-you for maintaining the status quo? Just so the world could spin for a few more years unperturbed?

"Thanks, I'll consider it," I said, and cut the call.

Nana and the professors looked at me, with the comical blank expressions of people trying to piece together a one-sided conversation.

"I can be a new-dollar millionaire if I let them cut the retinal cam memory out of my head"

Nana shook her head. "Don't do it."

"He can stay here," Dr Esparza said. "If the feds think he's with us, they'll back off. Plus, his AI is so high, enrollment has gone up seventeen percent, relative to last week, during the time he's been here."

"Professor!" Nana said.

"Well, it has. He has some serious social currency."

I thought about it. I really did. But I knew that even if the feds backed off, I wasn't suited to school life. The preening and subtle put-downs, the stupid pecking orders, all that. Like monetized propagation, but without the money.

Like. Money. All the restrictions. Like this morning.

Blinding flash.

There was something else I could do.

"I need to go outside," I said.

They frowned, but let me go outside. I saw them watching from the window. Probably trying to get their software to read lips, or patch into the campus security systems to mic my words.

I made another call. This one to Fernando Padilla, King of Brentwood.

It took me to a full-blown virtuality that mimicked what I imagined was his backyard: a big expanse of sculptured stone with a sapphire-blue pool artfully arranged in the middle, and panoramic views of downtown Los Angeles through tinted one-way glass walls. The detail was fractal and convincing, the illusion only spoiled by my monocular view. Padilla had slimmed himself down for the virt; his perfect black hair was combed immaculately in place, and gleamed like it had just been waxed. He had a neck. My mom lounged near the pool on a piece of outdoor furniture that looked like shat Styrofoam and probably cost more than my house. She was wearing a sundress, not a bikini, for which I silently gave thanks.

"Is she real?" I asked the King, gesturing at my mother.

"As real as it gets," he said. His voice was honey-sweet, hyp-

notic. The voice of someone who had time to speak, who you had to listen to.

Mom launched off the lounge and came to poke a finger in my face. "Of course I'm real! You think I'd let anyone copy me?"

"You'd think that, even if you weren't real," I said.

Her eyes jinked sideways, uneasy. "You ungrateful little shit! I –"

"Perhaps we should see what he wants," the King said. Mom glared at him, but stepped back.

"So what is it, Mr Palmetto? Is this our meeting? Does this stand in stead of our evening?"

"I know what you're doing."

"That and forty new dollars will get you a cup of Starbucks," said the King, smiling.

"I have video."

The King laughed. "That's impossible. Your eyeset was off the entire time you were there."

"It's not on my eyeset."

"Oh?" Eyebrows raised.

I smiled. "Thank my mother. For the retinal cam."

Eyes widened. For the first time, fear. The King whipped around to my mom. "Is this true?"

My mom clenched her fists. "Yes. Yes, he has one."

The King stood very, very still for a few moments. Then he turned to me. His face was carefully neutral, like a bomb in the moments before explosion.

"I don't believe you."

But his eyes didn't show it.

"I don't give two shits what you believe," I told Padilla. "If you want the video, you'll have a million yuan put into my account, unstipulated."

The King's nostrils flared. "And for this, I get?"

"To have your surgeon of choice cut the cam out of my head."

A nod. A thin smile. "You could make much more, going into business with us."

"I don't want the restrictions."

"I see. You understand the money will have restrictions from the Chinese government."

"As long as there are no additional ones."

"No!" my mom wailed. "Come in with us! A million yuan is nothing!"

I shook my head.

The King nodded. "It is done. Now, come to my house."

I checked my account. The bankbot looked very happy. One million yuan, no restrictions. I could get in the car, drive to the airport, and fly away to Patagonia.

I realized Nana had come out of the building. She stood about six feet away from me, her arms crossed.

"You did a deal?" Nana said.

"Yeah."

"With the government?"

"With the King."

Nana's face twisted into rage. "You're going back? To your mom?"

I shrugged.

Nana threw her hands up. "Dr Esparza was right. You always go back to your source."

"Nana –"

"Nothing. Say nothing!" she yelled, and stamped away.

I wanted to run after her. I really did.

But first, I had to make one more call.

I expected a call from the spooks after making the deal with the King, but my eyeset was silent all the way to Padilla's. I imagined scary too-perfect dudes peeking at me from behind bushes, cruising next to me behind tinted glass, just waiting for the word: *take him, now*. But we got to the place without any thriller-movie shenanigans.

The King of Brentwood's house was as grand and tasteless as I expected, a Gehry-esque pile of bronze-painted metal ribbons and raw cement, as big as a hotel. I expected bagboys to run for the car as I pulled up out front.

From the long, curving drive behind me came the sound of tires squealing. Of course. The spooks hadn't done anything, because they figured on bagging us all in one shot. All very neat and tidy. Almost no chance of a lawsuit.

It didn't matter. The deal was done.

My mom came out from behind the big tinted-glass doors that fronted the house, followed closely by Fernando Padilla. Her head jerked towards the sound of the tires squealing, now much closer.

Then she turned back to me, eyes open in shock.

I grinned.

"You're not him!" she snapped.

"Hi, Mom," I said. My WeRU proxy repeated it a moment later.

She stamped over to my proxy. "You're not my son!" Her eyes were wide, bloodshot, enraged. The King rushed up behind her, his gaze snapping from my proxy to the cars. My proxy glanced that way, too, showing sleek little candy-colored Yarises rounding the last corner.

"Look back at Mom," I said.

He did, just as Mom slapped him, sending his eyeset spinning. My point of view spun away with it, careening wildly before coming to rest on the ground. It pointed at the spooks, who were just emerging from the cars.

For just a moment, I felt sorry for the other me. But he'd known what he was getting into, and the contract was clear. A million yuan bought a lot of WeRU service. We'd sent out half a dozen proxies – one to go to the airport, one to head back to my house, one to go to my mom's, one to run south in the Lexus, and one to head down to the Commerce Casino with a bunch of the King's yuan. But I only watched the POV of the one going to the King's. He had to be realistic enough to fool the feds. They had to think he was the real deal. Since Antonio couldn't surgically alter and train a proxy in the tiny amount of time I gave him, we'd had to settle for a dye job, a face prosthetic, and a lot of whispering in his ear.

The spooks rushed by the POV of the fallen eyeset. I saw dirt embedded in the big CONVERSE logo on the bottom of their shoes. So California.

I laughed. Time to finish it.

I cleared my eyeset and went back to my current POV.

Above me, the giant aerostat screen of the East Valley Theater rose like a sheet of flame. Almost sixty acres of aerostat fog,

pierced by RGB lasers. It floated above the biocrete-sealed ruins of the old junkyards and dumps, where new nightclubs were popping up every other day. Really the best fate for Pacoima and Sun Valley, when you got right down to it. They got shiny new places to go, and the rest of the valley got free entertainment.

The marketing wank claimed it was the Biggest Screen in the World. And indeed, it was visible throughout most of the San Fernando Valley, and you could sometimes watch it in real time on Google Earth. I remembered nights on top of an abandoned midrise office building in Van Nuys, laying out under the cool stars with the warm concrete baking my back, my retinal cam full of images of my first love. Ironical to think that without her, I might never have seen the inside of the factory. And she had just been into me for the AI.

"You're crazy, you know," Nana said. She stood three feet to one side of me, as if I was slightly radioactive.

"I know."

"You don't know what's going to happen," she said.

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"No," Nana said. But her lips curled in a faint smile. It had taken a lot of quick talking after my phone call with the King to get her to come at all. I didn't know what state our relationship was in, or if we even had one anymore, or even if, after we got all through this, she could be The One. And that was okay.

The sun had dipped below the foothills to the west, and even though the sky was still bright, the screen shimmered in laser brilliance. The perfect time for the user-generated content wars. Anyone could come to the big open-air dancefloor underneath the screen, anyone could upload, anyone could take the chance at fame or ridicule. And, of course, being the commercial venture it was, they'd play the stuff from people with the highest AI first.

Like me.

I stood at the edge of the dancefloor, watching the bodies gyrating to a new-just-today mashup that was peaking on the word-of-mouth charts. Some heads snapped to look at me as my POV snapped back to the real me. Some frowned in confusion. In my eyeset overlay, my AI fluctuated wildly, then spiked even higher, as people who'd been following the drama at the King's realized they'd been fooled. More heads turned from the dancefloor to look at me.

"I'm uploading," I said.

My POV appeared on screen. I looked up at it, and pointed so the people on the dancefloor would look at it too. The video was fuzzy and ugly as old podcast shown on a theater screen, but it was enough. I saw the inside of the factory again, the vats, the slow crawl of the chain-drive system. I heard the murmurs of people on the factory floor.

I felt something warm on my shoulder. Nana's hand. She smiled at me, looking a little sad and uncertain. I wanted to say, *It's all right, it'll be all right*, but I didn't know if it would be. As Grigory said, what would happen when the secret was out?

People looked from the screen to me and back to the screen again. My AI spiked wildly as the online audience tried to figure out what was happening. Of course, nobody knew what they were seeing. Not yet, anyway. Not until enough people had dissected the video, enhanced the audio, and come to the same conclusion as Grigory had that afternoon. Even if the spooks

could snip the feed from the East Valley Theater, the screen was so hugely public that there were literally tens of thousands of visual feeds. They couldn't stop all of them. They couldn't rout the entire net. The secret would be out, for better or worse.

My eyeset shivered. It was Antonio. He looked happy as a new-minted yuan millionaire. And confused. He clearly had no idea what the hell was happening. "All that drama for this?" he said.

"Yep."

He shook his head. "I don't get it."

"Not yet," I said, watching the video end.

"You are one crazy fucktard," Antonio said, and signed off.

And then it started. In my eyeset, talkingheads started yammering over the end of my little video. Some of them mentioned nanofabricating and grey goo and magic dust.

"It's done," I told Nana.

My optacle shivered. The preview text showed: *Anders Patel, Impinging Talent Specialist, NBC Media Group.*

"I have a call," I told Nana.

"Government?"

"No, NBC."

Nana looked confused. I shared my POV with her and took the call. Anders avatar was slim and well-groomed, looking twentiesish. "Mr Palmetto, you may be the Man Who Said No, but you're the object of much attention tonight," he said.

"It seems that way."

"Have you considered putting that attention to good use?"

"How so?"

"We'd like to offer you a contract for a linearized account of today's adventure."

"How much?"

"One point seven five million golden dollars."

I looked at Nana. She looked back at me, eyes wide. It wasn't a huge amount of money. But the remains of the networks weren't that big. And it might just be the most money anyone had ever gotten for rejecting monetized propagation.

Anders went on: "We think you're on the front end of a trend. You're exposing the limitations of the pay-for-prop models. And with your mother –"

"No."

"What?"

"No. I said no."

"But –"

I cut the connection. Nana's expression blank and smooth, unreadable as a bowling ball.

I held out a hand. She looked at it for a moment. Another. Then she reached out and took it. I had no idea what I'd do in the future. I had no idea if I even had a future, once the nano-stuff sunk in.

"You're crazy," she said.

"Maybe I am."

And that was all right. In that moment, everything was just fine.

Jason Stoddard is an evil marketer, metaverse developer, and a Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award and Sidewise Award finalist. Editors at *Interzone*, *Futurismic*, *Sci Fiction*, *Strange Horizons* and other publications have been crazy enough to buy his stories. Visit him at strangeandhappy.com.

READERS' POLL

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during 2008. You may vote for and against any number of stories or artworks published in issues 214 to 219 inclusive (see list below). As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think – and we may publish the most interesting comments.

- To vote by post: Martin McGrath, 48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans, Herts AL2 2HL
- To vote by email: interzonepoll@ntlworld.com
- To vote online: ttapress.com/forum (Interzone topic)

The results will be published in Interzone issue 222, so please make sure your votes are in before 31 March

Africa (217)
Karen Fishler
illustrated by Paul Drummond

Africa (217)
cover art by Paul Drummond

Butterfly, Falling at Dawn (219)
Aliette De Bodard
illustrated by Paul Drummond

Comus of Central Park (217)
M.K. Hobson
illustrated by Darren Winter

Concession Girl (217)
Suzanne Palmer
illustrated by Darren Winter

Corner of the Circle (218)
Tim Lees
illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

The Country of the Young (219)
Gord Sellar
illustrated by Daniel Bristow-Bailey

Crystal Nights (215)
Greg Egan
illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

Dragonfly Summer (215)
Patrick Samphire
illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

The Endling (215)
Jamie Barras
illustrated by Darren Winter

The Endling (215)
cover art by Darren Winter

Endra – From Memory (216)
Chelsea Quinn Yarbro
illustrated by Chris Nurse

Everything That Matters (219)
Jeff Spock
illustrated by Kenn Brown

The Faces of My Friends (214)
Jennifer Harwood-Smith

Far Horizon (214)
Jason Stoddard
illustrated by Paul Drummond

Far Horizon (214)
cover art by Paul Drummond

The Fifth Zhi (219)
Mercurio D. Rivera
illustrated by Paul Drummond

Greenland (218)
Chris Beckett
illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

Greenland (218)
cover art by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

His Master's Voice (218)
Hannu Rajaniemi
illustrated by Paul Drummond

Holding Pattern (215)
Joy Marchand
illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

The Hour is Getting Late (216)
Billie Aul
illustrated by Chris Nurse

How To Make Paper Airplanes (216)
Lavie Tidhar
illustrated by Chris Nurse

IF (218)
Daniel Akselrod & Lenny Royter

The Imitation Game (215)
Rudy Rucker

Into the Night (216)
Anil Menon
illustrated by Chris Nurse

The Invisibles (216)
Élisabeth Vonarburg
illustrated by Chris Nurse

Little Lost Robot (217)
Paul McAuley
illustrated by Paul Drummond

Mundane-SF Special Issue (216)
cover art by Chris Nurse

Poppyfields (218)
Chris Beckett
illustrated by Vincent Chong

Pseudo Tokyo (214)
Jennifer Linnaea
illustrated by Darren Winter

Rat Island (218)
Chris Beckett
illustrated by Daniel Bristow-Bailey

Remote Control (216)
R.R. Angell
illustrated by Chris Nurse

The Scent of Their Arrival (214)
Mercurio D. Rivera
illustrated by Paul Drummond

The Shenu (219)
Alexander Marsh Freed

The Ships Like Clouds, Risen by Their Rain (217)
Jason Sanford
illustrated by Vincent Chong

Street Hero (215)
Will McIntosh
illustrated by Chris Nurse

Talk is Cheap (216)
Geoff Ryman
illustrated by Chris Nurse

The Trace of Him (214)
Christopher Priest

Traveller (219)
cover art by Kenn Brown

The Two-Headed Girl (217)
Paul G. Tremblay

When Thorns are the Tips of Trees (219)
Jason Sanford
illustrated by Vincent Chong

illustrated by Geoffrey Grisso



Each morning is a decision. Should I put on the brown mask or the blue? Should I be a tradesman or an assassin today?

Whatever the queen demands, of course, I am. But so often she ignores me, and I am left to figure out for myself who to be.

Dozens upon dozens of faces to choose from.



Sinner, Baker, Fabulist, Priest; Red Mask, Black Mask, Gentleman, Beast — Eugie Foster

1. Marigold is for murder.

The yellow mask draws me, the one made from the pelt of a mute animal with neither fangs nor claws – better for the workers to collect its skin. It can only glare at its keepers through the wires of its cage, and when the knives cut and the harvesters rip away its skin, no one is troubled by its screams.

I tie the tawny ribbons under my chin. The mask is so light, almost weightless. But when I inhale, a charnel stench redolent of outhouses, opened intestines, and dried blood floods my nose.

My wife's mask is so pretty, pink flower lips and magenta eye-lashes that flutter like feathers when she talks. But her body is pasty and soft, the flesh of her thighs mottled with black veins and puckered fat.

Still, I want her.

"Darling, I'm sorry," I say. "They didn't have the kind you wanted. I bought what they had. There's Citrus Nectar, Iolite Bronze, and Creamy Illusion."

"Might as well bring me pus in a jar," she snaps. "Did you look on all the shelves?"

"N-no. But the shop girl said they were out."

"The slut was probably hoarding it for herself. You know they all skim the stuff. Open the pots and scoop out a spoonful here, a dollop there. They use it themselves or stick it in tawdry urns to sell at those independent markets."

"The shop girl looked honest enough." Her mask had been carved onyx with a brush of gold at temples and chin. She had been slim, her flesh taut where my wife's sagged, her skin flawless and golden. And she had moved with a delicate grace, totally unlike the lumbering woman before me.

"Looked honest?" My wife's eyes roll in the sockets of her mask. "Like you could tell Queen's Honey from shit."

"My love, I know you're disappointed, but won't you try one of these other ones? For me?" I pull a jar of Iolite Bronze from the sack and unscrew the lid.

Although hostility bristles from her – her scent, her stance, the glare of fury from the eyeholes of her mask – I dip a finger into the solution. It's true it doesn't have the same consistency, and the perfume is more musk than honey, but the tingle is the same.

With my Iolite Bronzed finger, I reach for the cleft between her doughy thighs.

"Don't touch me with that filth," she snarls, backing away.

If only she wasn't so stubborn. I grease all the fingers of my hand with Iolite Bronze. The musk scent has roused me faster than Queen's Honey.

"Get away!"

I grab for her sex, clutching at her with my slick fingers. I am so intent that I do not see the blade, glowing in her fist. As my fingertips slip into her, she plunges the weapon into my chest, and I go down.

Lying in a pool of my own blood, the scent of Iolite Bronze turning rank, I watch the blade rise and fall as she stabs me again and again.

Her mask is so pretty.

2. Blue is for maidens.

The next morning, I linger over my selection, touching one beautiful face, then another. There is a vacant spot where the yellow mask used to be, but I have many more.

Finally, I choose one the color of sapphires. The brow is sewn

from satin smooth as water. I twine the velveteen ribbons in my hair, and the tassels shush around my ears like whispered secrets.

"I don't think I'll ever marry," I say. "Why should I?"

The girl beside me giggles, slender fingers over her mouth opening. Her mask is hewn from green wood hardened by three days of fire. Once carved and finished, the wood takes on a glass-like clarity, the tracery of sepia veins like a thick filigree of lace.

"Mark my words," she says. "All the flirting you do will catch up to you one day. A man will steal your heart, and you'll come running to me to help with the wedding."

I laugh. "Not likely. The guys we know only think about Queen's Honey and getting me alone. I'd just as soon marry a Mask Maker as any of those meatheads."

"Eww, that's twisted." My girlfriend squeals and points. "Look! It's the new shipment. Didn't I tell you the delivery trucks come round this street first?"

We stand with our masks pressed against the shop window, ogling the display of vials.

"Exotica, White Wishes Under a Black Moon." My friend rattles off the names printed in elegant fonts in the space beneath each sampler. "Metallic Mischief, Homage to a Manifesto – what do you suppose that one's like? – Terracotta Talisman, and Dulcet Poison. I like the sound of that last one."

"You would."

"Oh, hush. Let's go try them."

"That store's awfully posh. You think they'll let us try without buying?"

"Of course they will. We're customers, aren't we? They won't throw us out."

"They might."

My concerns fail to dampen her enthusiasm, and I let her tow me through the crystalline doors.

The mingled scents in the shop wash over us. My friend abandons me, rushing to join the jostling horde clustered around the new arrivals. While the mixture of emotive fumes makes my friend giddy and excited, they overwhelm me. I lean against a counter and take shallow breaths.

"You look lost." The man's mask is matte pewter, the metal coating so thin I can see the strokes from the artisan's paintbrush. A flame design swirls across both cheeks in variegated shades of purple.

"I'm just waiting for my friend." I gesture in the direction of the mob. There's a glint of translucent green, all I can see of her.

"You're not interested in trying this new batch?"

"Not really. I prefer the traditional distillations. I guess that makes me old-fashioned."

The man leans to conspiratorial closeness. "But you purchased those three new ones yesterday. I tried to warn you about the Iolite Bronze. It's not at all a proper substitute for Queen's Honey."

Memories of lust and violence fill me, musk and arousal, pain and blood. But they are wrong. I am someone else today. I shake my head.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I search for a hint of green glass or sepia lace. Where is she? "I'd never let someone use Iolite Bronze on me."

"Didn't you say it was a gift when I sold it to you?"

"What?"

"I was the shop girl in the onyx mask."

I am shocked beyond words, beyond reaction. It is the biggest taboo in our society, so profane and obscene that it is not even in our law books. We do not discuss the events and encounters of our other masks. It is not done. What if people started blaming one face for what another did, merely because the same citizen wore both?

The moment of speechless paralysis ends, and I run. I fly through the glittering doors, not caring that I've left my best friend behind, and run, run, run until I am back to the dormitory on Center at Corridor. I huddle in the lift, and it whisks me to my quarters. On my bed, I sob, the tears wetting the inside of my mask. A part of me worries that I will stain the satin, but it is a distant part.

When the tears run out, I am done with the day, done with this mask. But the unmasking time is still far off. If I'd only worn the tan mask today, with the bronze veneer and dripping beadwork, I wouldn't have fled from the pewter-masked deviant. I'd have punched him in the golden flesh of his gut or hauled him to the queen's gendarmes for a reckoning.

Then I realize what I'm thinking, what I'm wanting – another mask, but not during the morning selection, not during the unmasking – while I'm still wearing today's.

And I'm afraid.

3. Black is for sex.

In the morning, as I stand barefaced among my masks, looking anywhere but at the tan one, I receive the queen's summons. It is delivered, as always, by a gendarme masked in thinly hammered silver. He rings my bell, waiting for me to acknowledge him over the intercom.

The gendarmes are the only citizens about during the early morning when the rest of us are selecting our daily masks, just as they are the only ones who patrol the thoroughfares after the unmasking hour, collecting retired masks and distributing new ones.

"Good morning, gendarme," I say.

"Good morning, citizen. You are called upon today to carry out your civic duty."

"I am pleased to oblige." A square of paper slips through my delivery slot and into my summons tray, bringing with it an elusive sweetness. The queen's writs are always scented like the honey named after her, both more insistent and more subtle than the stuff which circulates in the marketplaces.

Among my arrayed masks, raised above the others, is the sable mask – hammered steel painted with liquid ebony. It is the consort mask, worn only to honor the queen's summons. The paint is sheer, and glimmers of silver flicker through the color. The eyes are outlined in opaque kohl, a masked mask.

I lock the delicate chains with their delicate clasps around my head. For a moment, I am disoriented by the lenses over the eyes. It takes longer for me to adjust to the warp in my vision than to the feel and heft of the mask. But not much longer.

The music trills liquid and rich around us, and I concentrate on the steps. In her mask-like-stars, the queen swirls and glides across the ballroom in my arms. Caught in her beauty and my

exertions, I have missed her words.

"I beg your pardon, my queen. What did you say?"

Her mask tilts up, and the piquant flavor of her amusement fills my senses. "I asked if you were enjoying the dance, whether you liked the refreshment."

"I have not sampled the buffet, but it looks lavish. As to the dance, I am worried that my clumsiness might offend you or that I might misstep."

"I've never danced with you before? That would explain your stiffness."

"I have not had the pleasure. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was only a whimsey. I don't dance with many. You probably won't dance with me again." The queen gestures, and the music stops. She leads me to her couch – crimson sheets and alabaster cushions. I am more familiar with this type of dance, but she isn't ready for me yet. Her scent, though heady, tells me it is not time to mate, although it will be soon.

It confuses me, this waiting. Why am I here, if not to do my duty?

She reclines on her couch but not in the position of copulation.

"Talk to me," she says.

"What would you like to speak on, my queen?"

"Do you have a favorite mask?"

It is an odd question, treading the boundary of indecency.

"No, my queen. They are all precious to me."

"Don't you wish you could discard some masks, perhaps the ones that you suffer in, and just wear the ones that are pleasurable?"

Was she testing me? "They are all precious to me," I say again. "Each in its wonderful variety. I would never presume to contravene the law."

"Not even to bend it a little? There are some citizens who wear just a few masks and don others only as often as they must in order to stay out of the purview of the gendarmes."

"But that's criminal."

"Technically, it's legal, although it defies the heart of the code. Generally, the number of their select rotation is large enough that no single mask becomes dominant. Do you find the prospect appealing?"

Dominant mask? What would be the purpose in limiting one's mask selection? Her words make no sense.

"No."

My answer pleases her. Her scent rises, and with it, my arousal, and I cannot think clearly anymore. The queen is the font of desire and satisfaction – the perfume of true Queen's Honey between her legs, her need, mine – nothing exists but the urgency of mating. It eclipses mere copulation as the sun outshines the stars. I submerge in a tide of desire and completion and the rise of desire again, over and over, until the unmasking hour.

In the morning, barefaced and aching, I report to the Mask Makers galley. I avoid looking at their ugly, soft countenances. It's partly instinctive discomfort at being seen without a mask, but also, Mask Makers have always made me uneasy. I feel sorry for them, their faces so colorless and insipid. It's an irony that they wear such bland features and plain colors, yet they make such marvelous faces for us, each one unique in its brilliance. I pity them, and I'm glad I was not born to their caste.

I hand over my summons writ and accept my newest mask,

my favor from the queen. It is glossy saffron with pointed wires to fasten it. It has no mouth opening, but it does not seem lacking for that. Like every face they craft, it is a feat of artistry.

4. Orange is for agony.

I press the saffron mask to my face and wrap the barbed laces around my head. A fleeting touch, my fingertips on the painted metal tell me of thick runnels that dent the surface. Their unevenness makes the fit uncomfortable. For a moment.

Wire mesh presses above and below. If I lie down, I can stretch my neck, a little. But then the mesh cuts into my feet, my forearms, my chest. Standing, sitting, a few back-and-forth steps. But pacing only reminds me how small my cell is. And they do not like for us to pace. Exercise thins the fat between muscle and skin, making the harvest more difficult.

My neighbor wears a ginger mask dotted with cobalt sequins. He urinates, and it splashes through the mesh on me. I hiss my rage, crowded by the scent of his body, and return the favor.

I'm glad when the workers come for him and watch as they trap him in their loops. He tries to fight, but he has nothing sharp or hard to wield. Their wicked tools, edged with blue light, open him from neck to groin. He barely has time to bleed before they carve perpendicular incisions, flaps to better flay him in a single piece.

His eyes bulge as they tear away his skin, all the movement he is capable of. He's silent, for there is no mouth on his mask; he is as mute as I.

When they're done, they leave him writhing in the liquids of his body on the wire mesh floor. They take the heavy cloak of his skin with them.

Then it's my turn. The ginger planes of my neighbor's mask swivel to me, so he can watch.

There's no place to run in my tiny cell, and their loops pinion me. When they begin to cut away my skin, it is the most terrible pain I have ever known.

Their masks are lemon, daffodil, and butterscotch. Pretty and yellow, like sunshine.

5. Jasper is for jilting.

The next morning, the choice is harder than usual. I flinch away from the saffron mask and stare for a long while at the tan one. But it feels inappropriate to select it.

Like a whiff of passing corruption, the notion of going without a mask today, simply staying in my quarters and not choosing a face, flits through my thoughts. It is too scandalous to contemplate; I feel guilty to have even considered it.

Without looking, I reach among the rows of empty faces and snatch the first one my hand falls upon.

It is a brackish green, the color of stagnant water in a pool that never sees the sun. The chin and nose are gilded in dark velvet, and the lips shine, liquid silver hand-painted on silk. I tighten the woven cords around my head.

I hover beneath the window of my lover, she of the cerulean mask detailed in voile. She reclines on her balcony, and a song of courtship thrums from her dainty mouth. I inhale the delicate body scents her servant wafts out with a fan: enticement and

temptation, innocence and promise.

"Do you love me?" my sweetheart calls.

"With all my soul. You are my everything."

"I don't believe you," she laughs. "How are you different from all the other men, just waiting for a chance to slather me with Queen's Honey?"

"How can you say that? I've asked you to marry me."

"What does that prove? Any meathead with a tongue can do that. And anyway, I don't want to marry at all. Marriage is a sorry state that leads to fighting and grief."

I pantomime exaggerated dismay for her benefit. "What can I do to convince you of my sincerity? Ask me for anything, and I'll give it to you."

"Do you have a jar of Queen's Honey?"

I hesitate. If I answer truthfully, she might accuse me again of being a libertine. But it's also my courting gift. She will feel slighted if I don't have anything to offer her.

I sigh and choose the better of my options. "A humble present to honor your loveliness."

"Good."

When I'm not immediately rebuffed, I dare to hope.

"I'm sending my girl down. Give the Queen's Honey to her, and we'll all play a game. She'll seal the jar so the contents may not be used without breaking it, and puncture its lid, freeing the scent. If you can spend the afternoon with me and my girl in my enclosed boudoir and keep from breaking the jar open, I'll believe that you love me and not simply the pleasures of copulation. But if you lose control and *do* break the jar, you can slake yourself on her, but you'll never get a word or whiff from me again."

"What, pray, do I get if I can restrain myself?"

Her laughter is like a teasing wind. "If you can check your desires until evening, I'll send her away and break the jar myself."

I'm both excited and dismayed by the prospect of her 'game'. My lover will ensure that our time is not spent on chaste recreations or thoughtful conversation. She will pose herself and her servant girl in all manner of ways suggestive of copulation. And she is probably already drenched in one of the trendy distillations – Passion Without Doubt or Exotica or Citrus Nectar – to madden me further. Still, the reward will be sweet. And at the very least (my love did not altogether peg me wrongly), I'll get to do the servant girl.

My prospective consolation prize opens the door. Her mask is a sage green that suggests transparency, the eyes rimmed in toffee lace. She snatches the Queen's Honey from me, but there the anticipated script ends. She twists off the lid and scoops the unguent out. Without embarrassment or coyness, she rubs it on herself, between her thighs. As I stare dumbfounded, she smears a glistening coating on me. Instantly, I'm aroused and eager.

"Want me?" she whispers.

"Yes." Flesh on flesh, the Queen's Honey brooks no denial.

"Then catch me." She sprints away.

I waver for only a breath. Above, my sweetheart calls down plaintively, wondering at our delay. But desire roars through me, and all I care about is the servant girl.

I chase her through the dormitory block as she weaves around crowds and over obstacles – sculptures, shops, new constructions. Sometimes men turn, catching the fleeting perfume of Queen's

Honey mingled with her sex as she darts by.

I am enthralled. She fills every breath I take. I run until I'm a creature of fire – blazing lungs and burning limbs. But it is spice to my eagerness. I will catch her, and then we will copulate.

She leads me past the market district, past shop windows filled with citizens making purchases, and into the rural outskirts where the machines harvest our food and workers gather esoteric materials for the Mask Makers guild.

In a shaded copse of green wood trees, she drops to her knees. I'm upon her, not even waiting for her to assume the proper position. She opens to me, and I rush to join our bodies.

It is glorious, of course, the release all the more satisfying for the chase. But even as I spend myself, I notice something wrong. The girl is not making the right movements, and her scent, while intoxicating, is strange. Beneath the Queen's Honey she is impatient when she should be impassioned. As soon as I'm finished, she pulls away, and for the first time after a copulation, I'm not happy and languid, awash in the endorphins of sex. I feel awkward.

Before I can say anything, the girl tears off her mask. The horror of her unmasking paralyzes me; I'm unprepared for her next action. She lunges, ripping off the bindings of my mask, and yanks it free.

I am barefaced.

It's not the unmasking hour, not the time for emptiness and slumber. Without my mask, I don't know how to act or feel, or what to say. I don't even know if I *can* speak, for I never have without a mask. I'm lost, no one. The nucleus of my personality and intelligence is empty; the girl has stolen it.

6. White is for obedience.

While I kneel, stupefied, the girl discards my mask, letting it fall among the long grasses where we loved. I don't even have the presence of will to retrieve it.

She examines the inside of her mask. With infinite care, she peels a sheer membrane away. It is like a veil of gauze or chiffon, but this veil has a shape. There are nose, cheekbones, and chin.

It is a mask, but a mask unlike any I've seen. The fabric is unornamented and diaphanous white, like thin fog or still water, all but colorless. It doesn't conceal what it covers, only overlays it.

She takes this ghost of a mask and drapes it over my face. Without cord or chain, it fastens itself, clinging to my head. It is such relief to have my nakedness covered, I'm grateful when I should be outraged.

I wait for the mask to tell me who I am and what to do.

And I wait.

"There's not much oversoul there," the girl says. Without a mask, her features are too animated, obscenely so. I avert my gaze, wondering if the ghost mask exposes my expressions in such an indecent fashion.

"It's only a scaffold to help you get past the schizo panic," she continues. "It doesn't have any personas or relationship scenarios to instill, and absolutely no emotives."

I don't like the ghost mask's vacancy. But at least I can think now, and it occurs to me to scramble for my own mask.

"Stop," she says.

I cannot move. My fingertips brush the darker green and glint of silver lying in the grass, but I can't pick it up.

"I'm afraid the scaffold does have an obedience imprint. I am sorry about that, but it's necessary. You wouldn't be able to access the oversoul in your mask anyway. The scaffold creates a barrier that mask imprints can't penetrate, and you won't be able to take the scaffold off. Go ahead, I know you want to. Try to remove it."

I grope my face, my head looking for something to undo. There's nothing to unknot, release, or unbuckle. I find the edge where the ghost mask, the scaffold, gives way to skin, but it's adhered to me. The memory from yesterday – the saffron mask, being skinned alive – is enough to deter me from anything drastic.

"What did you do to me?" I ask. "And why?"

"Good, you're questioning. I knew you'd acclimate quickly." A scent penetrates my distress. She is pleased. Except the tang isn't right. It's not feminine but not masculine either. She has no mask to tell me whether she's male or female. Should I continue thinking of her as a girl? And for that matter, the scaffold hasn't provided me with a gender. Am I a man or a woman, or am I neuter, or perhaps some sort of androgyne?

I feel lightheaded and ill. "If this is some perverted game," I say, "I'm not amused. I'll report this to the gendarmes. They'll confiscate all your masks for this crime, and –" I trail off. Her naked face is testimony of her indifference to the severest penalty of our society.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I whimper.

"Did you ever wonder who you are beneath your masks?" she says. "When you say 'me', who is that?"

Hearing her voice the question that has lately made my mornings so troubling and the hours after unmasking so long, is a kind of deliverance. I'm not the only citizen to have these thoughts; I'm not alone in my distress. But the guilt remains, along with an added unease. Is exposing my crime what this is about? Am I to be penalized?

"Don't be afraid," she says, "I'm not going to turn you over to the gendarmes or anything like that."

My breathing quickens. "Are you hearing my thoughts?"

"No, only watching your face."

"My face?"

"It conveys emotions. It's like smelling another's confusion or knowing that someone's angry by the tightness of their shoulders, only with facial musculature. Before long, you'll read it as instinctively as you do scents and stances."

"You say that as though you expect me to be pleased."

Her mouth curves and parts, revealing the whiteness of her teeth. Being witness to such an intimate view is both repulsive and fascinating.

"I know you don't think so now," she says, "but I've given you a gift, one very few people receive." She stands. "Walk with me."

I don't want to go anywhere with her, but the scaffold compels me to obey. We stroll deeper into the wilderness, leaving my mask in the grass. It is an uncomfortable sensation, having my will at odds with my body.

"I've been watching you for a while to make sure you were right," she says.

"Watching me?" Fragments of confusion knit into understanding. "You're the shop girl who sold me the Iolite Bronze and the deviant man with the pewter mask."

"And the customer at the bakery who bought a dozen egg tarts from you before that."

"The woman with the pink mask who asked for the recipe?"

"Yes. And before, when you wore your roan and iron mask, I was in the audience when you presented your new poem. And the day before that, I picked indigo with you for the Mask Makers."

We emerge into a clearing. A broken-down hut lists, obscured by overgrown foliage. Her sage and toffee mask still dangles from her fingertips. She passes its brim over the doorknob, and the door swings open.

"I'm glad to finally meet you," she says. "You can call me Pena."

The interior is dim, lit by stray sunbeams poking through holes in the ramshackle walls.

"Pena?" The word is meaningless. "Why?"

"It's my name, a word that means me, regardless of what mask I'm wearing or not wearing."

I snort. "Why stop at each citizen having their own name? Why not each tile or brick the builders use or every tree or blade of grass?"

"Every street has a name," Pena says. "And every shop."

"So we can tell one from the other. Otherwise, we couldn't say where a place was, or differentiate between one food market and another."

"Exactly." She runs her fingers over a floorboard, and I hear a click. In the far corner by the fireplace, flagstones part to expose steps.

"What's down there?" I ask.

"Answers. Come."

We descend, and the flagstones rumble shut overhead. Ambient light washes over us – dim and red, casting bloody shadows.

We're in a tunnel with rough, stone walls. The light extends ten paces before us; beyond is darkness. Pena strides toward this border, and I am obliged to accompany her. When we are within a pace of light's end, more red comes on to reveal another span of corridor. When we are within this new radius, the light behind us goes out.

And so we walk.

"Why do citizens need names?" I ask. "We change masks every day, unlike shops and streets which stay the same. What if I discover that my physician is the same citizen as my murderer? Or a citizen in one mask is my lover and in another, my enemy? If I call that citizen by a single word, it's like treating all their mask identities as the same person."

"That's the point," she says. "It lets us be who we truly are, underneath our masks."

I shake my head. "Without the masks, we're not anything."

"There was a time before the masks."

"And we were empty, primitive creatures, without will or purpose, until the First Queen created the First Mask to wear and carved faces for the citizens and –"

"And She designated the Guild of Mask Makers and tasked them with their sacred duty so that everyone would be imbued with souls, blah blah blah. I know the lies."

Her heresy is both disturbing and intriguing. "What do you believe, then?"

"That's what I'm going to show you."

"Why me?"

"There's a group of us named. We seek out others who harbor the same doubts and resentments we do, and we liberate them."

"I don't want to be liberated."

"Don't you? Haven't you wanted to be free of the daily selection routine? Or chafed against the mask, wishing the hour of unmasking came sooner? Don't you hover in indecision some mornings, not because the choosing is so hard, but because none of them appeal? Don't you wonder who you could be if you were left to decide for yourself?"

I am saved from having to answer by the appearance of something new when the next lights activate: a door.

7. Red is for revelation.

"Where are we?"

"Beneath the palace at the Mask Makers guild."

She passes her mask over the door. Like the hut's, it opens.

I balk. "No. Absolutely not. It's prohibited."

She studies me. "I can make you, but I won't. It's your decision."

I open my mouth to repeat myself.

"But first, hear me out."

I exhale. "If I must. But it won't change my mind."

"You know I've been keeping by you as you've switched masks. I was also with you when you wore the saffron mask at the leather harvesters."

The memory is still raw. "So?"

"Do you know who I was?"

"One of the skimmers, I presume."

"I was your neighbor in the adjoining cage."

Despite everything, I'm dismayed. "Didn't you know what they were going to do to you, to us?"

"I knew."

"And still you let them, willingly even. Why, in the name of the First Queen?"

"Because, to be with you, I could either hurt you or be hurt, and I chose not to hurt you."

"Am I someone to you? Have we been lovers or spouses or friends?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then why?"

"Because I know who I am, and my actions are a reflection of me. I don't skin people alive."

Her last sentence carries a conviction, a certainty that makes me envious.

"What would you do if you had to choose," she says, "if your decisions extended beyond what mask to wear any given day? Would you willingly inflict such suffering upon another?"

"I would... I-I don't know."

"Do you want to know?"

And I find I do.

The door opens upon a storage room jammed with row upon row of shelves. Bolts of multihued fabric, rolls of ribbon and lace, and jars of washes, dyes, and lacquers are piled together without any semblance of order. More rolls of textiles spill out of cubby holes and closets lining the room.

"This is their overflow storage, where they keep their excess," Pena says. "We raid it for our mask-making supplies. Named artisans can create near-perfect replicas of guild masks, but without the oversouls, of course."

"With added features that can unlock doors."

She displays her teeth again. Some part of me has learned to equate that facial configuration with positive emotion, even before I breathe the perfume of her approval.

"You noticed. Very good."

"How do they do it?"

She leads me through the jumble. "It's complicated to explain. All of our mask functions, including the scaffold you're wearing, are based on the Mask Makers' constructs. There's bits and pieces appliquéd, sewn, glued, or imbedded in all masks which stimulate thoughts, trigger emotions, assign personality traits, and so on. Named artisans have taken apart and put back together these pieces, re-aligning and modifying them until they've gained an understanding of their workings. In the process, they've discovered that the components can do much more than imprint oversouls, like lock and unlock doors. And there's still so much we haven't figured out yet."

The supply room exits upon a dark corridor that illuminates red at our approach. But unlike the one from the hut, the circle of light shows a cluster of turnings that forks in different directions.

"You make it sound like you named have been at this for a while," I say.

"We have." She sets off down one of the twisting tunnels. "Sometimes the gendarmes get wind of our activities, so we work exclusively in pairs – one mentor, one recruit. That way, the most named any of us knows is two, your mentor when you're recruited, and your recruit once you're ready to bring someone in. We disseminate information and requests through codes and drop-off points. It's slow but safer."

I've lost track of the bends and turns we've taken. "You must recruit pretty selectively, if each mentor can only take one."

"Mentors can take another recruit if theirs is apprehended by the gendarmes." The lighting casts deep shadows over the planes of her face, and for a moment, it seems that she's wearing a crimson mask. She brushes her fingers over her eyes, and they come away wet.

"What happens when the gendarmes catch you?"

"They kill us."

I shrug. "That's all? So you lose the day. In the morning –"

"No. They *kill* us. It's not like the petty murders citizens inflict upon each other. There's no waking up from the death the gendarmes deliver."

I stumble, shocked. "That's...that's *monstrous*. How is that possible? How can our laws permit it?"

"You said it yourself; without the masks, we're nothing. When the gendarmes execute one of us, they reassign all of that named's personas to the population at large. The oversouls continue, and there is no disruption among the citizenry. I think the gendarmes grieve more when they have to destroy a mask that has been 'murdered' than when they kill one of us."

Pena rounds a corner, and there is a wall. It's creamy smooth, as though stone workers spent hours painstakingly sanding it to perfect flatness.

"Did you make a wrong turn?" I ask.

"Afraid of getting lost?" Her tone is teasing. "Don't worry. Even if I had made a wrong turn, my mask contains the labyrinth's secrets. But I didn't."

I half expect her to wave the mask at the wall and a door to miraculously appear. She doesn't. Instead, Pena lifts a hand to her mouth and tears at it with her teeth. Dark blood oozes, and she smears this droplet on the wall.

Soundlessly, the wall glides up and disappears into the ceiling. White, not red, light comes on, blinding after the dimness.

Pena tugs me forward while I'm still blinking. I squint, eyes tearing and blurry, at the small room we have entered. The walls are polished metal, and they encircle us, curving outward so it feels like we're inside a cylinder. A closed one. While my eyes adjust, the door shuts itself.

In the room's center is an ornate chair of silver and gold. Resting upon its seat is a mask.

I recognize it, for it is the stuff of legend. Carved from a single diamond with a million-million facets, each representing a mask-to-be, the First Queen's Mask, the one She created with her own hands to bring enlightenment to us all.

8. Diamonds are for death.

Pena touches my face, and the scaffold slips away. The anxiety of being barefaced is forgotten in the wonder of the First Mask.

"The truth, your answers, they're all in the oversoul of that mask," she says. "All you have to do is put it on."

"What if I don't?"

"Then we go back, and tomorrow morning, you choose a mask to wear, like every other morning, and you never see me again."

"I might turn you over to the gendarmes."

Her lips part and flash teeth. "What will you tell them? That a citizen kidnapped you and filled your head with truth? How will you find me? And how do you know the gendarmes won't kill you simply for knowing this much?"

She's right, of course. "But I don't have to put on the First Mask?"

"What you do is up to you. Now and forever."

I hesitate for a heartbeat before striding to the chair and seizing the First Mask. It's so light. I'd expected it to be heavier. Holding it aloft, I realize the eyeholes are encased in nearly transparent lenses like my consort mask, except diamond instead of glass.

"You might want to sit before you put it on," Pena says. "I didn't and ended flat on my back."

I perch on the gold and silver chair, and set the mask over my face. There are segmented strands of diamond to wrap around my head that fasten with glittering diamond locks. The lenses warp my vision, disorienting me. But only for a moment.

Crowing exultation.

The war is finished! My last rival and her progeny are dead, and I reign in exclusive sovereignty.

My children, I am so proud of you. This is the dawn of a new age, a glorious and splendid age.

My scientists have conquered our only remaining enemy: time. They have found the key to unlocking the shackles of age and injury, and conquered the last disease. I am no longer chained by the dictates of perpetual reproduction. The years of my empire will be like a magnificent river, rippling past eon after eon, powerful and endless.

I do worry, however, that my soldiers will decline. They are the

simplest of my children and only understand rigid procedures and physical contests. Perhaps I should manufacture a new corps of soldiers, an elite one. They can vie with each other in mock battles for the honor of being counted among my gendarmes.

The river of years is murky and deep, and I cannot see where it will take us.

I am stymied at an unanticipated quarter: my consorts. The noblest of my children, nearly my equals – clever and curious, independent and imaginative – I should have known they would feel neglected and adrift when I ceased summoning them to mate. They are creatures of great passion, as I am, and now they squabble, forming factions and carrying out vendettas.

I have started opening my body to them again, but I will ask the scientists to develop a synthetic pheromone so they may copulate amongst themselves.

I am despair.

A citizen killed another today, beyond what my scientists were able to restore. I must accept the truth; we are an aggressive people, not destined for peace, and all I have tried to build is in ruins.

If only there was a way for my consorts to expend their passions harmlessly.

I must confer with my scientists.

At last! I have devised an end to the chaos which blights my citizenry.

My scientists have developed a means of imprinting memories and eliciting emotions that may be interchanged, swapped out, and added upon with seemingly infinite variety. My consorts may oppose each other and mate with promiscuity, all without garnering rivals or blood feuds.

I have set my scientists to generate these oversoul masks in copious quantity and in wondrous variety.

This must work.

All is well. The activities of my children are once more in accord with my desiring, and eternity's river holds no more uncertainties.

There was a minor dilemma, but I have solved even that. It seems that I am not immune to the effect of the masks. I thought my royal will would safeguard my identity, but it is becoming a strain, sorting reality from fabrication.

I have had an oversoul commissioned. It will be a lasting record of all the tribulations I have confronted and my efforts to remedy them. This mask shall be sealed beneath my palace in a chamber secured by steel, and my blood shall be the only key that unlocks it.

I take off the mask of diamonds. Pena watches me, her lips parted.

I tumble out of the chair and fall to my knees. "I am your servant, First Queen."

Pena's eyes widen, and she laughs. "Oh, no, no." She is at my side and hauls me up. "I'm not the First Queen."

"But your blood opened the door."

"Don't you get it? We're all of her blood, each of us descended

from the First Queen. Some joke on her, huh?"

I stay silent.

"Come," she says. "We need to get back before the hour of unmasking. If we're seen on the streets after, the gendarmes will take us."

I straggle after her, lost in my thoughts. I don't try to keep track of the red-lit corridors and notice only when we are among the fabrics and dyes of the storage room.

"Hsst." Pena gestures.

"What is it?"

Without warning, she shoves me, and I tumble into a closeted hole. Bolts of velvet and felt topple upon me. She flings an oversized bottle of jasmine oil after, engulfing me in cloying sweetness.

Then there is confusion. The red light extinguishes, and white beams flash in the darkness. They catch and glint off white metal – glittering eyes, gleaming brows – the silver masks of the gendarmes.

Hidden in my cubby, my scent as obscured as my body, they do not detect me. They converge on a single spot, Pena, huddled between shelves.

"By order of the queen, you are hereby accused and convicted of treason," one gendarme says.

I cannot smell anything over the sickening jasmine, but I can see the terror on her face. She glances at me, and there is a beseeching in her eyes, and a question, but she looks away before I can understand it.

"The penalty for treason is death, citizen," a gendarme, perhaps the same one, says. "Do you wish to repent? Identify your co-conspirators, and we will allow you to return to the way of the mask."

Pena lifts her head. "Never."

They don't ask again. They activate their loops, and I'm reminded of the day of the saffron mask. I'm ashamed of the gladness I felt then.

They don't skin her, but this is as gruesome, if swifter. A gendarme kneels over her as she is pinioned on her back by bands of blue. Bracing himself, he staves in her face with his fist. I want to look away. It is an obscene violation, a perverse defilement to damage a citizen *there* – to do any violence which might cause harm to a mask. But Pena isn't wearing a mask, and I don't look away.

He strikes again and again until there is nothing left of the front of her head but a wreckage of bone and pulped wetness.

9. The last mask.

The gendarmes are as efficient in disposing of Pena's body as they were in dispatching her. When they have gone, the red light comes on, and I dare to creep out. As I untangle myself from a length of burgundy velvet, my hand falls upon an unmistakable shape – Pena's green and toffee mask. The sight of it, so soon after the atrocity of her execution, unhinges me. I start crying, and I cannot stop. But it doesn't matter, because her mask will hide my tears.

Somehow, I make it to Center at Corridor and the familiar confines of my quarters. Safe.

But I am *not* safe. I cannot forget the First Queen's memories, which the gendarmes would surely kill me for having, and more,

I cannot erase the beseeching question in Pena's eyes.

I tear off her mask. It's not the unmasking hour, but I don't care. I'm weary of masks, even a blameless one without an over-soul. Pena's death burdens me with shame and guilt – like being flayed again, but with the pain inside.

I am surrounded by masks. Each is a player in some fabricated theater – artist, victim, rake, entrepreneur, lover, spouse, friend. None of them is real, but I can put them on and escape these feelings.

But I won't.

One after the other, I destroy my masks. The ones that shatter are the easiest. I hurl them at the floor and shards spill across the tile. The ones that burn, I commit to fire. But the metal ones I must work at, smashing one upon another until they are twisted out of all recognition.

I save the sable mask for last out of a sense of propriety. Although it is metal, it is oddly malleable, and it crumbles between my hands. The lenses fall out of the eyeholes and tumble among the broken bits of ceramic and glass on my floor.

I stand amidst the debris that was my life and don the only mask I spared, Pena's green and toffee one.

My lover glances at me in her cerulean-with-voile mask, and lets me in. She thinks I am her servant girl.

"Where did you go?" she demands. "Do you know how long I've been waiting for you? And where is my suitor?"

Her quarters are much like mine, much like every citizen's. There is a mask room, a kitchen, and a bedchamber. I brush past her, and she follows, continuing to scold as we enter her kitchen. I find what I need in one of the drawers: a tenderizer mallet, heavy and solid. Even when I turn with it upraised, she doesn't relent.

"Are you ignoring me, you slut?" she shouts. "How dare you!"

Only when I yank off her mask does she become afraid, and by then, it's too late.

I smash the mallet into her face. She stumbles, and I ride her as she goes down, hammering the metal tool into her face over and over. Bones and flesh mash together into pulp, and still I persist. I must be thorough.

Pena did not have time to teach me the secrets of her league of named. But through her, I have learned enough. I have seen how the gendarmes kill. I do not have their loops or their strength, but I know how to murder so that my victims will not wake.

Pena also taught me to know who I am.

I am chaos in this ordered society, the flaw in a carefully wrought plan. I am turbulence in the queen's eternal river.

Eugie Foster calls home a mildly haunted, fey-infested house in metro Atlanta that she shares with her husband Matthew, and her pet skunk Hobkin. Her publication credits number over a hundred and include stories in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Cricket*, *Cicada*, *Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Jim Baen's Universe*, *The Third Alternative*, and anthologies *Best New Fantasy* (Prime Books), *Heroes in Training* (DAW Books) and *Best New Romantic Fantasy 2* (Juno Books). Her first short story collection, *Returning My Sister's Face and Other Far Eastern Tales of Whimsy and Malice*, will be published in 2009 from Norilana Books. Visit her online at eugiefoster.com. Eugie is the editor of TTA Press's *The Fix Online* (thefix-online.com), which publishes reviews of short fiction from the full spectrum of magazines, webzines, anthologies and collections, plus interviews and a range of complementary features.

AFTER EVERYTHING WOKE UP BY RUDY RUCKER



Jayjay awoke beside Thuy; comfortably he molded himself against her. Early sunlight filtered in through the redwoods. The newlyweds were in sleeping bags on the forest floor beneath a tree. They'd teleported here to install their home. It was the first of May.

A big blue Steller's Jay perched on a jiggly thin branch overhead, cocking his head. Jayjay teeped stealthily into the bird's mind. He savored the gentle jouncing of the branch, the minute adjustments of the jay's strong claws, the breeze in his comfortable plumage; he chirped contentedly, *chook-chook-chook-chook*, then inhaled through the nostrils of his fine black beak, relishing the smells of fruit and flesh, studying the promising scraps on the ground, assessing the large creatures beside the mound of goods; but now, *kwaawk kwaawk kwaawk*, one of the big animals moved her limbs. The jay released the branch, glided free and flapped to the next tree. *Kwaawk kwaawk*.

"Kwaawk," echoed Thuy. "That's his name."

"All the others have that name too?" said Jayjay.

"Yeah, but each of them says it differently." Thuy turned to face Jayjay, giving him a kiss. "I can't believe we own this piece of land. What does that even mean? We handed over our money so that a record somewhere says 'Property of Jorge Jimenez and Thuy Nguyen.' But there's so many plants and animals already living here, and if you count the other silps too – it's an empire."

"I hope they don't resent us."

"Those nice smooth rocks by the stream like us fine," said Thuy. "Teep into them. See how eager they are to be in our foundation walls? They like the idea of being mortared together, and of rising above the ground. Beating gravity is a big

deal for a rock!"

"You're *my* big deal," said Jayjay, teeping Thuy teeping him teeping her. The first few times that they'd telepathically mirrored each other, they'd felt themselves tobogganing towards the point-attractor of a cerebral seizure. Fortunately you could always shut off your telepathy. With practice, Jayjay and Thuy had learned to skate around the singular zones, enjoying the bright, ragged layers of feedback – well, Jayjay enjoyed this more than Thuy. Not too long ago, he'd been addicted to merging with the planetary mind called the Big Pig. He liked head trips.

After a little more mind play, Thuy gently pushed Jayjay away. She was smiling, with her eyebrows optimistically arched. Her longish black hair hung loose, her pink lips were delicately curved. Hanging a few feet above her was a Stank Shampoo ad. Thuy and Jayjay made their living as round-the-clock members of a reality show called *Founders*. But they'd learned to ignore the ad icons and – above all – the vast worldwide audience. If you were doing something really private, you could always turn off your teep. But fewer and fewer things seemed private enough to bother hiding.

"You really think we can teleport a whole house this far?" asked Thuy.

"Sure," said Jayjay. "Working alone, you and I can't teek much more than couple of hundred kilograms at a time. But with a dozen of our friends pitching in, for sure we can move our little house here from San Francisco. We'll build the foundation today, and this evening – *alley-oo!* – we drop our cozy nest into place. Housewarming party!"

They'd already brought bags of sand and cement for the foundation, also a big flat pan for mixing the mortar, a mortar hoe to mix it with, plus a pair of mortarboards and trowels. Jayjay liked tools, and had managed to borrow these via the human mind-web. The silps in the tools were stoked about the coming job.

"It's gonna be hard moving all those stones for the foundation," grumbled Thuy. "It's so peaceful here in the woods. I feel like lying around and thinking up a beautiful scene for my new metanovel. Or teeping with animals. Isn't this supposed to be our honeymoon?"

"We can teleport the stones instead of carrying them. Teek 'em."

"That's work, too. When I reach out and remotely teleport a rock I bet my brain-wattage shoots up to a thousand."

"It isn't just your *brain* that does the teeking," said Jayjay. "We think with our whole bodies. Consciousness is everywhere."

"Whatever," said Thuy. "I'm just not ready to move hundreds of stones."

"Aw, come on, Thuy," said Jayjay. "When we were in high-school, you were always the goody-goody, not me. You're the ant and I'm the grasshopper. And the grasshopper's rarin' to go! Leap!"

"Put that stale rap away," said Thuy. "It's been a long time since I was an ant. I'm all grown up now. I'm every bit as wild a kinq as you." She rolled towards her knapsack and dug out some dried fruit. "It's too bad the rocks can't teleport themselves. Then we could just, like, teep out invitations and they'd all show up."

"Actually we're lucky that animals and plants and objects can't teleport," said Jayjay.

"I guess so," said Thuy. "Otherwise Kwaawk the blue jay would be eating these raisins instead of me. And if flames could teleport? They'd eat the whole world. I wonder if Gaia is actively

preventing the lower orders from teleporting."

"I don't think it's Gaia's doing," said Jayjay. He'd been one of the first to figure out teleportation, and he liked to hold forth about it. "The ability to teleport is peculiar to the human mind. Rats and roaches are too carefree to fuzz out and teleport. Over the millennia, we humans have evolved towards thinking ourselves into spots where we're not. It's all about remorse, doubt and fear. As for intelligent objects – sure the silps can talk, but they don't have our rich heritage of hang-ups: our regrets about the past, our unease about the present, our anxiety about the future. Humans are used to spreading themselves across a zillion worlds of downer what-if. That's why we can teleport."

"Depresso mingo," said Thuy. "Remorse, doubt and fear? That's all you see in your life? How about gratitude for the things that worked out – like, ahem, marrying me! What about curiosity? What about hope for a sunny tomorrow? Happy what-ifs?"

"Let's get back to the rocks," said Jayjay, in retreat. "Even though they can't teleport, they can tell us about their balance points. And whether they're a good match for their neighbors."

"I can just hear them," said Thuy. "Lay me now, mortar-forker!" She liked speaking extravagantly. It was a way of rebelling against her prim upbringing. "Trowel my crack!" She got to her feet to rummage deeper in her backpack, then pulled on her striped tights and a long-sleeved yellow T-shirt.

A great shaft of sun slanted into their woodsy glen, with gnats and dust motes hovering in the light. A friendly breeze caressed the newlyweds and stirred the needles on the trees. Kwaawk the blue jay squawked.

"Everything sees us," marveled Jayjay, putting on his baggy black pants and his green T-shirt. "Everything is alive. I like seeing inside Kwaawk's head. I think – if I wasn't a human – maybe I'd be a jay, or, no, I'd be a crow. They're so smart and tough."

"I'd be a dragon," said Thuy, filling her mouth full of nuts and chocolate. She kept on talking via teep. "Dragons are one thing my parents talked about that I really loved. The Vietnamese dragons aren't fat fire-breathers you know. They're skinny crocodiles with snaky curves, and fringed all over. Punk dragons. I'd be a dragon playing heavy rock and roll." Thuy paused to swallow her food. "I just noticed that a water spirit here doesn't like us. The silp in this stretch of the creek."

The mind within the narrow, burbling stream was what earlier generations would have called a *genius loci*, or spirit of place. Far from being a superstition-spawned fantasy, the silp was quite real. Silps were emergent intelligences based upon chaotic natural computations as enhanced by the ubiquitous memory storage available via the recently unfurled eighth dimension. Silps were everywhere now.

Jayjay wasn't quite sure how to address the unfriendly spirit of the stream. But Thuy plowed right ahead.

"Hi Gloop," she said, eating another handful of gorp. "What if my husband and I build you a tiny little dam? You'll get a nice waterfall at the downstream edge, with some brook trout in the pool. We can bathe there."

"Gloop?" said Jayjay, smiling at Thuy. "Husband? You're like Eve in Eden. Naming the creatures."

"Gloop really is his name," said Thuy. "You just have to listen. Like this." She teeped him a mental maneuver she'd invented for converting a silp's self-image to an English name.

Jayjay listened inwardly to the crabby spirit of the stream, and, yes, Thuy was right, his name was Gloop. Gloop overlaid an image upon his eddies and lines of flow, the visage of a stern old man with trembling cheeks and curly beard. He didn't like the idea of a dam.

The friendly rocks at the stream's edge had names too: Clack, Bonk, Rollie, and Harvey. And the redwood overhead – her name was Grew. Unlike Gloop, Grew was happy to have Jayjay and Thuy as neighbors. Mammals were good for fertilizing her roots. “But don't burrow!” cautioned Grew.

Intrigued by his newly-learned ability to name the silps, Jayjay teeped into the aethereal chorus of atoms that made up his body. Each of his ten octillion atomic silps had its own distinct timbre. If he'd had the patience, he could have started converting the timbres into names to be stored in his lazy eight memory. But there were still practical limits to the sizes of mental feats that a person could do. An octillion steps was at the very edge of what you could expect to carry out in your head, even if you were as obsessive as their young friend Chu.

Teeping a bit higher up the great chain of being, Jayjay perceived the names of his organs and muscles. Larry Liver. Ben Bone. They'd still be talking after he died. At least for awhile.

Gloop's scowling rosy face kept hovering in his mind's eye. Jayjay walked over and took a pee near the stream, not right into it, but close enough to show Gloop who was boss. The little crests of the stream's riffles writhed. On the telepathic plane, Gloop was gibbering in fury. Jayjay pinched shut the channel connecting him to the angry silp. Bye, Gloop. That was one of the things that made lazy eight telepathy bearable. You could firewall things out.

“I say we build our foundation right here,” Thuy said, scratching lines in the dirt with a shovel. She was telepathically comparing her marks to the dimensions of the two-room wooden cottage that she and Jayjay had put together in San Francisco.

Jayjay picked up a shovel of his own. “Perfect spot,” he told Thuy. “It's flat, the light's good, and it's not too close to – to the stream. We'll scrape out little trenches for the cement mudsills.”

Teeping into the Gaian overmind, Jayjay and Thuy viewed Earth's gravitational field as wiggly orange lines growing out of the ground. Helpful Gaia marked off equal elevation points on the lines, making it easy to see when the ditches were level and true.

“I'll mix the mortar!” said Thuy when the digging was done. “You get the stones.”

Jayjay teeped one of stones he'd noticed before: Harvey. Harvey was the size and shape of a flattened cantaloupe. It would have been easy enough to walk over and pick him up. But Jayjay wanted to show off.

Teleportation was a head trick you played on yourself. You perfectly visualized two locations, got mixed up about which was which, then switched to being there instead of here.

When Jayjay had first discovered how to teleport – about six months ago – he'd quickly learned how to carry objects along. And recently he'd figured out that he could teleport things without having to move himself at all. This was telekinesis, called teek for short.

Teeking Harvey was a matter of merging into the rock's silp-mind and coaxing it into a superposed quantum state in which

the rock was both beside the stream and resting in the clearing. And then Jayjay asked the rock-mind, “Where are you?” precipitating a quantum collapse that put Harvey beside the foundation ditches they'd grubbed out.

Sitting in the clearing, staring at the spot where he was bringing the rock, Jayjay first saw a few twinkling dots in the air, then a ghost of the stone, and then the rock itself.

“Oho,” said Harvey. His voice in Jayjay's head was orotund. “Not the kind of thing I'd do on my own. That fuzzy bit in the middle – how did we manage that?”

“You can watch me move your cousins,” said Jayjay. “But you won't ever figure it out.”

“Never mind,” said Harvey. “I'll just sit here. It's good in the dirt.” No guru could ever be as mellow and non-attached as a stone.

Over the next half hour, Jayjay lined up Rollie, Bonk and Clack next to Harvey, along with another few hundred of their cousins from the edges of the stream. The rapid flipping between pure and superposed quantum states was making him queasy. He took a break, dropping to the ground next to Thuy.

Thuy had set up her big mortar pan in middle of where their living-room would be. She'd carried some buckets of water from the creek and was rocking away with her mortar hoe – it was like a regular hoe except that it had two holes in the blade, the better to stir the water, sand, and cement.

“Remember, this is a special fast-drying waterproof mix,” Thuy warned. “We better start spreading it around. Up and at 'em, grasshopper.”

“I'm tired of teeking.”

“So use your beautiful bod. I've got a bucket for scooping up mortar. I'm gonna mix a little more so there's enough for the whole first course of stones.”

Stepping around the waiting stones, Jayjay lugged buckets of mortar by hand, laying down thick gouts of the gray cement. And then he and Thuy got on their knees and began setting the stones, using trowels and carrying little mounds of mortar on the flat square mortarboards.

The smooth stones were somewhat disk-shaped. Jayjay and Thuy set them upright on their thin edges, like rows of books. The stones helped out, teeping among themselves to decide who would fit best against whom. Some were smaller than others. Where necessary, Jayjay and Thuy mortared in extra stones to keep the top edge approximately level. All this took longer than expected, and the mortar was nearly dry by the time the base course was done.

“Now we can rest, huh?” said Thuy.

“Yeah,” said Jayjay. “Let's eat those sandwiches I brought.”

“Vibby,” said Thuy. “Sorry I was rushing you with the mortar.”

“Well, I'm the one who made us get up too early. You just wanted to lie in your sleeping bag and write.” Jayjay hugged her. “Let's start over.”

“I'd like that.”

They ate their sandwiches, laid down, and made love. One flesh. Cozy as could be, they fell asleep for an hour. And then Thuy woke up.

“All our little friends are waiting for us,” she said, nudging Jayjay. “And I'm not talking about the *Founders* audience.”

Jayjay lay there, savoring Thuy's shape and sound and smell. All around them, listening in, were the pullulating silps – in the pine needles, the sleeping bags, the dirt, and the currents of the air; in his hair, his muscles, and his molecules – silps without and within.

"I like having the big Gaia worldsoul," said Thuy. "But I get tired of all these tiny, pushy, minds."

"It's all good," said Jayjay. "Human minds used to be rare fireflies in the dark. But now everything is conscious – lit up. It's like day instead of night. Look over there – our foundation wall already has a silp of its own."

The mind in the low wall was something more than the minds of the individual rocks. She was reveling in her rectangularity. She was happy to know she would soon grow a little higher. Might she ask how soon would that be?

"Oh shut up," Thuy told the wall.

Jayjay and Thuy cuddled a bit more, while Thuy thought about her metanovel. And then it was back to work. Jayjay fetched a bucket of water from the creek. He was still blocking out Gloob's telepathy vibes, but he couldn't help notice that, by taking so many rocks, he'd made an ugly bare muddy spot.

Gloob's domain only extended about five meters in either direction, but other silps lived upstream and downstream: there was a separate silp for each little pool, cataract and bend. No point alienating these neighbors too. In order to quickly search further afield for building materials, Jayjay reached for mental contact with Gaia, the summit of the planet's hierarchy of minds.

He saw an Earth globe with jungle lips, canyon nostrils, ocean eyes, cloudy hair, and – floppy pig ears. The new Gaian mind had based her human interface upon the former orphidnet mind that had been called the Big Pig.

The round face winked, sneezed, and inhaled, creating a wobbly vortex that drew Jayjay through the vasty caves of her nose-holes into the interior of a virtual space demarcated by great smooth walls of living green tissue – it was like being a gnat inside a pitcher plant. Pale green pistils swung through the information matrix like snakes; each pistil's fuzzy triangular top formed a rudimentary face with two eyes and a snout.

"Aha," said a pistil, addressing Jayjay one on one. "It's you again."

As always, plugging into the global mind was getting Jayjay high. Enhanced as she was by the world's computation, Gaia was brimming over with astute perceptions woven into crystalline truths mounded into white-light peaks and philosophical castles. Each time Jayjay came here, it required a distinct effort to stop himself from merging into Gaia for hours at a time. Those addicted to this style of ecstasy were known as pigheads.

Thuy hated it when Jayjay went mentally missing – last year she'd dropped him because of that. Nowadays he worked to manage his habit, not only to keep Thuy, but also in reaction to a hideous overdose experience he'd had three months ago. He'd merged into the overmind for six hours and it had literally seemed to last sixty years. He was still digging himself out from under the strata of false memories he'd accumulated during that session. Sometimes he felt like he was eighty years old.

Carefully keeping his focus, Jayjay told Gaia he was looking for flat rocks nearby. The triangular face bobbed gently, then spat out a glowing acorn. It was a locative hyperlink to the natural world.

Resisting the temptation to stay here enjoying the Gaian buzz,

Jayjay dropped down to ordinary consciousness and mentally followed the acorn's link. He found himself in teep contact with a slate cliff beside a river in the very forest where he was building his home. The cliff's name was Herga. Thousands of jagged dark gray plates of slate lay at Herga's base. Not wanting to make another enemy, he asked the cliff if he might take some of her loose stones.

"I treasure every one of them," teeped Herga in a whispery tone. "But it's okay. I shed fresh slate every spring."

Physically still in the clearing with Thuy, Jayjay teeked one of the cliff's stones to lie by his feet. It was a rough-hewn little guy called Camber. Camber was proud to announce that he carried six trilobite fossils within himself; the trilobites piped up to agree. Camber also pointed out that his edges made up a jagged polygon of thirty-seven sides. He was perfectly amenable to being mortared into the foundation's sill course.

"Just so I feel a little breeze," he rasped.

Jayjay set Camber in place. Well and good.

And now it was time for the giant blast of telekinesis needed to fetch the rest of the stones.

"Gimmie some chocolate first," said Jayjay's body, the inner voice calm and velvety.

Jayjay was always sympathetic to his body's requests. Who better to listen to? He ate a dark chocolate bar and, for good measure, he chewed up some roasted coffee beans.

"Are you bringing more rocks?" prodded Thuy.

Jayjay pushed himself, teeking a couple of hundred of Camber's relatives in the space of five minutes. Near the end of the teeking frenzy, the ground near the distant cliff started looking oddly smooth – perhaps Jayjay was being too greedy, and the cliff's silp-mind Herga was teep-shielding her slates from him. Increasingly weary, working around the strange smooth patch for the last few stones, Jayjay momentarily lost track of what he was doing and nearly mistook his own head for a rock, very nearly teeking it off his shoulders and across the clearing. Ow. He stopped. Enough rocks.

"You're wonderful!" exclaimed Thuy, looking at the pile of slate.

Although Jayjay felt like curling up in a ball and hugging himself, he squared his shoulders and smiled. He wanted to keep up appearances for his bride. Holding himself together, he got busy laying the slates flat atop the base course of creek stones.

As before, the mortar was drying a little too fast. Thuy scolded it. The mortar said it would do what it could to slow down its crystallization. Silp minds had some slight control over the quibits of their innate quantum computations.

Jayjay worked the masonry, staying in close telepathic contact with his trowel. As he neared the end of one wall, he noticed a piece of slate that needed to be rotated an inch so that the course would come out even. He stuck his trowel into the crack between the stones, twisting it and pushing on the slate with his hand. The trowel and the slate were giving him good, steady mental feedback.

But now all at once everything got confused. The trowel wriggled out of the crack and sprang to one side, stabbing a deep gash into the ball of Jayjay's thumb. Chanting a solemn dirge, his blood oozed forth, thick and dark. Dropping his stoic facade, Jayjay cried out in fear and pain.

"Oh, poor Jayjay!" exclaimed Thuy. She fetched a clean hand-

kerchief to press against the wound.

Meanwhile the trowel was apologizing to Jayjay. "He pushed me," teeped the trowel in a narrow, triangular voice. "He meddled."

"Who?" demanded Jayjay.

"Gloob. The silp from the stream."

"We'll worry about Gloob later," interrupted Thuy. "First let's teep into your tissues, Jayjay, and I'll help you heal."

Jayjay dived down into his thumb to see the frantic hugger mugger of his platelets, phagocytes and dermal cells – with Thuy's lithe mindweb avatar glowing to one side.

"I can play traffic cop," said Thuy. "Directing your nutrients and white blood cells to your wound. You can get a thousand-fold improvement over just letting the cells and molecules bumble along. I learned about the technique because Nektar was helping Chu fix that underdeveloped spot in his brain tissue. You've noticed how he's more sociable now, haven't you?"

"I guess," said Jayjay distractedly. "Don't go goosing my cells too hard. I don't want to flip them into cancer tumor mode."

"Don't worry," said Thuy. "All I'll be doing is herding them. Leave it to me."

"Fine," said Jayjay and tuned out, relaxing into the human-scale world. Thuy had one arm around him, and with the other she was pressing the handkerchief against his hand, with her eyes unfocused. He looked around, wanting to distract himself.

Their foundation wall was nearly done. The sun was in the west now, slowly turning gold. A good day's work. A fine first of May. The redwoods swayed and sighed, the creek chuckled. Jayjay was feeling a tingle at the base of his thumb.

Jayjay reopened his telepathic contact with the stream silp. They had to talk. Gloob was scowling and tense – ready for the worst. Like everyone else, Gloob had lazy eight omnividence,

that is, the ability to see everything on Earth. Gloob well knew how nasty humans could be.

Jayjay felt a blip of empathy for the unhappy silp – and he decided to end the feud. As a human, it was up to him to exercise the higher emotions.

"I'm sorry I pissed so close to your bank," he told Gloob. "I'm sorry I took so many rocks. And Thuy and I don't really have to make a dam. Let's be friends."

Gloob gleamed and grew smooth. "Maybe. If you behave." The silp paused. "About that tiny dam you mentioned – do you really think I'd get trout?" He spoke not so much in words as in pictures.

"You bet," said Jayjay, telepathically pointing out some minnows just upstream.

"And – do you think you could dig a proper latrine?" added Gloob. "On the uphill side of Grew?"

"Sure," said Jayjay. "And our house will have a nanoseptic system, with nothing but compost and pure water coming out." Gloob made a cheerful gurgling sound. The war was over.

"Behold!" said Thuy, gently pulling away the handkerchief. Jayjay's wound was healed, a pink line in his skin.

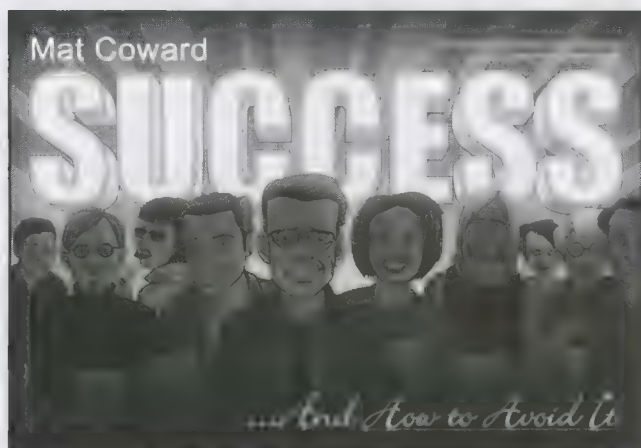
"You're amazing, Thuy."

"Come on in and splash off!" called merry Gloob.

With light hearts, Thuy and Jayjay romped in the stream for a while. And then it was back to work.

It only took another half hour to finish smoothing out the foundation wall. The mortar set up nice and hard, as strong as stone.

'After Everything Woke Up' will form part of Rudy Rucker's next novel, *Hylozoic*, which will be published by Tor Books this spring. For more about Rudy's fiction and artwork, and much else besides, visit him at rudyrucker.com.



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SPY

VS

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NEIL WILLIAMSON

It's 7.15am and I'm watching for the bastard postman. All postmen are bastards of course, but this one's the worst. He's shift. He's untrustworthy. And I'm pretty much certain he's on the take from Him across the road.

On my monitor I have four windows open. The active one is the camera from the bay window in the front room. It shows the empty junction of Woodlands Drive and West Princes Street. This is key because it means I'll see the postie before He does. It's still dark outside and the camera view is green from the ACME Sniperscope. I admit, there's a thrill. It's like a stakeout or a political assassination. The *Bourne*...whatever comes after *Ultimatum*?

The second of the PC windows is another camera. This one

looks directly across to His flat. The curtains are closed of course, but I've got ACME's MoSho motion alarm and enhancement application running on it. It's better than the software the police use on their Big Brother cams. I had to order it three times before it finally arrived (tellingly, the week the usual postie had the flu), but it was worth it. This thing can detect the tiniest of curtain twitches, grab the whole event and zoom in to show you the pupils of His bastard eyes. I've got a directory full of those clips. I've pored over them for hours, but none of them give a hint of a clue about why all of a sudden out of the blue he's got it in for me.

I blame social networking. These websites – Mybook, Face-place, all that – they encourage you to lay out all your likes and

your dislikes, your pros and your cons, your loves and your hates for all the world to see. Choose sides, as it were. In everything. Even things you've never really thought about before you have to be for or against nowadays. They claim it helps you find kindred spirits, make new friends around the world; what it really does is create new enemies.

Talking of enemies. Still no postie.

The third window, where my webcounter stats are updating realtime, flashes red. I glance away from the street view and recognise His IP crawling systematically through my webpages. What's he looking for? What does he see there that makes him hate me so much? As I watch, he clicks through the Super Ally tribute page, then the New Labour discussion board, then my Buffy shrine, my Classic Rock fansite, and all my Flumps nostalgia stuff. Which one of these has pissed him off so much that he feels the need to hound me like this? I need to know. He must be stopped.

Reluctantly I glance at the fourth window. It's a familiar view, and not wholly unlike the first. A West End tenement, curtains closed, apparently dead to the world. His view of *my* flat. It streams live on his own site, in amongst the lurid green Celtic guff and the turgid reviews of indie bands no one's ever heard of, and every time I so much as leave the house, his watching, adoring *fans* go mental, clogging up his message boards with vile, and frankly quite hurtful, diatribes. He's even got a Paypal button for donations, and an ACME Spyware gold member logo.

If you feel that I should find that worrying, I do.

At the moment the window's showing the live shot inset with a looping rerun of an incident timed at 03.15 this morning. A figure clad in black from plimsolls to balaclava slinks stealthily from the door of my close, crosses the street and performs some furtive activity just out of sight directly below. The postie's going to learn the hard way that if he won't take a – not-immoderate – bung to stop delivering mail-order hardware across the road I have other ways of winning this arms race. ACME's taze-o-matic novelty doorbell will see to that.

It's nearly half seven now, still no postie. Then I jump, thinking I see movement, but it's only my email ghosting up for a second. Two Faceplace notifications, a bunch of Mybook friends requests, and an ACME Spyware Who'sWatchingYou report that combines my stats and my latest bill. I try to look away before the figure at the bottom registers.

Too late.

Okay, I admit that this is costing me a packet, but it's worth it. If I hadn't signed up to ACME I'd never have become aware of the potentially disastrous negative aspects of social networking. As it was it warned me about Him-over-there's activities just in time.

Just goes to show you that not all spam is worthless. Especially ones that address you personally and tell you that due to your top-percentile social-networking profile, you've been specially selected to receive a free ACME Who'sLikeMe? assessment.

Where is that postie though? If he can be relied on for anything it's sprinting through his round so he can get to the pub before lunchtime. You can hear him thundering up and down your stairs. For once I *want* to hear him thundering up and down my bloody stairs. Today's the day the ACME CarbonLite HomeSniper Rifle kit arrives. Soon as I unpack that baby, fit it up

to the Sniperscope and swing it ostentatiously in his direction victory is mine.

The camera view still shows an empty street. Funny for this time in the morning. No cars, no pedestrians, no postie...

A terrible, terrible thought.

What if I've been hacked? Not my PC itself of course, that's ACME'd up to its metaphorical eyeballs, but what if He's somehow time-delayed the feeds from my cameras? I'm sure I ignored some ACME promo pop-up about that. Big flashing green thing with a cartoon of an asphyxiating PC.

And if I'm not looking at realtime events...

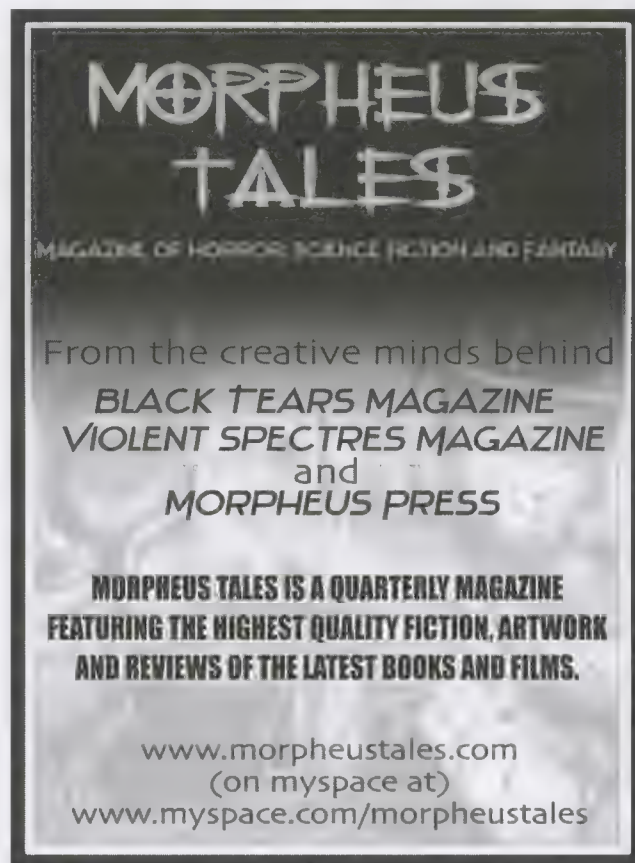
I sprint from the bedroom into the living room, and rip open the curtain.

Just in time to see the postman dying from a single gunshot, a halo of blood pooling round his surgically eggshelled skull. I know the work of the ACME CarbonLite HomeSniper Rifle in the hands of one who's had some time to practice with it. I've seen the promo videos.

Shocked, I can only stare. A barrage of camera flash from across the road illuminates my outrage. My humiliation will be all over His newsgroup by the time I close the curtain.

This means war.

Neil Williamson's previous *Interzone* stories appeared in issues 177 and 184, and he has also featured in *Black Static's* previous manifestation, *The Third Alternative*. His short fiction collection, *The Ephemera*, is still available from Fictionwise.com. Neil proudly carries the ritual scars of the fierce literary duelling school known as the Glasgow SF Writers Circle. He distrusts the motives of the internet, but could not now live without it. Witness his ongoing battle of conscience at neilwilliamson.org.uk.



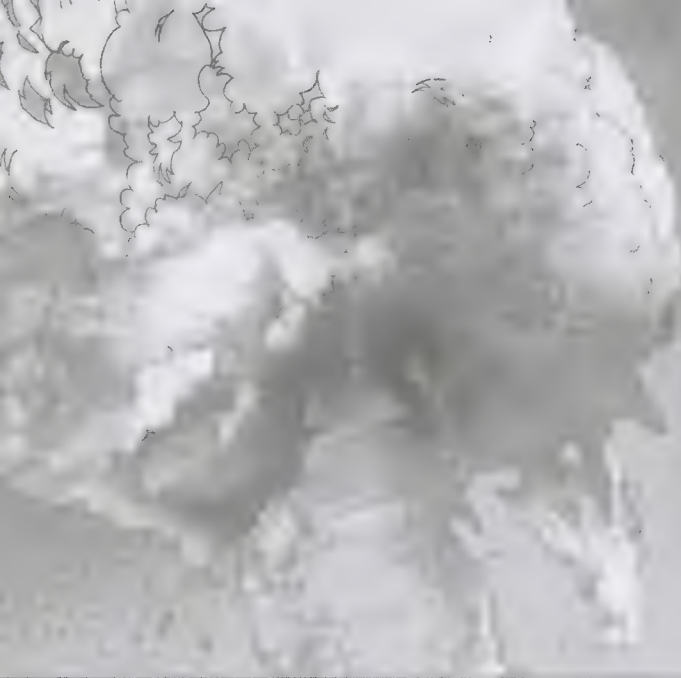
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ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

LEAH BOBET MILES TO ISENGARD

We pull out midmorning, elbow to tooth in the big ol' rented semi, and beat hell down the old country switch-back roads until we hit it. Dancer don't even notice until Chez yells *stop the truck!* and yanks the steering wheel over, and there it is, a little kid lying in a heap on the pitted-down blacktop road.

"Aw, *shit*," says Priest from the sleeper door, and dives a hand into his pocket for a cigarette.

Maurice ratchets up the trailer door and looks out, rifle in hand, eyes so big I can see the whites of them even from the front of the truck cab. "S'alright," I call out to him, walking casual. "Just hit something."

"Huh," Maurice coughs, and slides back into the darkness of the trailer, not putting down the gun. It's almost time he gets relieved of the trailer watch, the hard watch: making sure that if the checkpoints stop us, they don't take away the bomb.

"He's alive," Chezley says, holding the little body flat on her outstretched arms. There's blood coming from its forehead where the gravel's pounded in: the kid flew instead of crunching under the wheels like a squirrel. Thank god for small mercies.

"I don't think you're supposed to pick them up like that," Priest says, and I start over to where Chez has him chest-flat on her arms. I took CPR back when I was a kid learning swimming; I can remember A for airway, B for breathing, not much of the rest. If the kid's not breathing, though – we'll cross that bridge when we get there. There's a pulse, that much's for certain when

I press fingers against his sweaty neck, and then reach out awkward to feel down the arms and legs for breaks.

Nobody here's a doctor: doctors wouldn't hold with what we're doing. So I sorta do my best.

"I think the right arm's broken," I say to Chez, avoiding even looking at where Dancer is pacing and fidgeting by the cooling cab of the truck. "Gonna have to bring him in back and wrap it."

"Should just leave it," Dancer mutters over the lip of a plastic water bottle as we bring the kid into the cab. "We don't have the supplies for this."

Chez lays it down in the bottom sleeper bunk delicate as a land mine. "First aid kit's on the wall."

Dancer gets back in front and yanks the parking brake. The truck hisses, shunting steam through its teeth. I slide into the passenger side and pick up the marked, creased, circled maps.

Over the highway, in the distance, lie the faintest outline of mountains.

Doctors would've sold us to the highway watch all the way back in New Mexico, back when we first got the bomb. That's why we didn't bring any: not doctors, not lawyers who could've stared down the checkpoint officers with all sorts of legalese, not anyone who had anything to lose. We didn't know that kind back in Marion anyway: the only rich people in Marion were the government scientists, and they wouldn't drink the places we drink.



STOP!

**MILITARY
CHECK POINT**

NOTICE



They kept their kids away from ours on holidays.

I tended bar at Goerke's and picked up kitchen shifts when one of the two cooks called sick. Dancer fixed trucks with her cousin down at the stop at the edge of the highway. Chezley was a schoolteacher in the overfull county school, and the only one of us five who might have done something with herself.

Before she came into Goerke's and said *hey Sammy, wanna save the world?*

I sit my watch from eight o'clock 'til two, with the rifle across my lap and a book tilted on top of it. Dancer would shit bricks if she knew I was reading on watch, but the closer we get, the more we all do it. There's something 'bout sitting alone in a semi-trailer with a strapped-down nuke – no, not something. We all know exactly what thing, and we all got our ways of hiding from it.

Evening, Sam, says the bomb in its casings, knowing I've been thinking of it instead of reading 'bout a girl and a bull. *I have a red little button. It's small and round and neat.*

Talking back just makes it worse when it comes to the bomb. I stick my nose harder into the book and listen to it, mouth the curves of the vowels of the dim words on the page.

They'll catch you, it whispers, on a beat like a skipping game, and whistles 'Ring Around the Rosie' to the rhythm of the wheels.

It's only eleven-thirty. I stand up and rap on the back of the trailer, three long, three short, three long. The truck slows down, pulls off to the side, and Priest opens up the trailer outlined by muzzy highway streetlights. "What?"

"Need a relief," I tell him, sucking in the cool fresh country air. It leaks through, this far from cities. You smell green through the seams of the windows.

He spits and puts out his butt on the tarmac. There's no smoking 'round the bomb. "All right, but that means you watch the kid instead."

I close my book and toe it under tied-down canvas; a box of instant noodle cups, wrapped and stacked to keep us moving in case our pictures have got out to the truck stops. "How is he?" I ask him, to cover up the move.

"Howling." Priest hops into the truck, already muttering under his breath. I hop out into the clean, cool night.

The kid is howling when I hit the cab, loud enough to hear with the windows down from halfway across the road. Dancer's down in the ditch taking a piss, and her jaw is the hard lock of a drunk who's about to throw a sloppy, vicious punch.

"Shit, Maur, you give him some aspirin?" I shove past Maurice who's sitting in the driver's, maps spread across his knees like napkins. The wailing rises a little and pauses, then scoots back down low like a siren.

"Where the fuck did I grow more hands to give people aspirin?" he says, and yanks the map closer to the onboard light. "We're not gonna make Provo tonight."

"Fine," I say, and push for the sleeper. In the top bunk, Chezley rolls over and tightens the limp pillow over her ears.

"Hey," I say quiet when I perch down on the bottom bunk, next to the kid who's still fucking screaming. "Hey there now, calm down."

Talking to kids is like talking to drunks: you just gotta be slow and careful, use small words, not make sudden moves. He looks up at me with sticky fifth-beer eyes, not understanding shit.

"Hola?" I try, and he doesn't blink. It's gotta be the pain, or we've picked us up a feral and words won't mean a damned thing.

I fumble through the first aid kit while the door slams and Maurice swings us into the right lane, into the endless flicker of light-dark-light that's interstate driving at night. A passing set of headlights illuminates IBUPROFEN after what feels like three hours in the hole with the bomb, and I drop one in his open mouth before he can finish the wail. It's too much – it's gotta be too much for a kid that scrawny – but it puts him out like a light, still breathing, and the foldaway bunk creaks as Chezley finally relaxes on the shitty mattress and breathes like sleep.

I check him out again once it's quiet: skinny wrists, skinny fingers, dirt on the legs that can't all be from the sticky gravel skid he took along the road when the truck's fat grille made contact. Thank god kids bounce, I say to myself, and run fingers up the little neck, looking for cuts and bruises.

There's a *beep* when I touch the chip. When it comes to life, washing a dirty red glow across the pillow.

It doesn't turn off when I touch it again.

"Guys," I say, poking my head into the cab compartment, fighting the bump and rush of motion. "We got a problem. This one's not a stray."

We can't afford to pull over again, not for more than a piss break or a shift change. But we huddle together in the cab and while Maur's still driving, we have us a council of war.

Dancer prods at the chip again, too hard against the kid's floppy little neck. "Fuck, I don't know," she says, letting him down with a hell of a lot more care than she would've otherwise. "I know engines, not *this*."

"Kid soldier," Maurice says, quiet at the wheel, not looking back. "They had 'em when I shipped out. Run 'em in ahead of a line. Once the enemy fills 'em with bullets their heart stops, they explode."

"Jesus," Chez whistles, hands fidgeting in her lap. She's looking at the kid like I am. He can't be more than ten.

"That's it. We gotta get him out of here," says Dancer, tapping her foot on the floor of the cab. "We drop him off in Provo, they'll fix him up there."

"They'll come after him," Chez breaks in. I can barely see the lines of her nose and cheek in the dark. "And if he tries to run again and dies it'll take people out right in the middle of the city."

"They won't come looking for him –"

"Maurice, how much is that chip worth?"

"They'll look," he says with finality, and changes lanes.

"Okay, well here," Dancer says. "Now. Pull over."

Chez stands up.

"I ain't leavin' no child on the roadside to die," Maur says evenly, and tightens his big hands on the wheel.

"Priest won't either," I say into the quiet. It doesn't take a big explosion to start the reaction in a nuke going. Just one in the right place. I'm no nuclear scientist – we didn't bring those along either – but I sure bet the gas tank of a truck, going up all around that whispering uranium core, would find itself the right place.

"We could nuke the whole fucking Southwest –" Dancer stands up, and Maur shoves her down into the seat, away from the rear-view, away from the windshield.

"Look," he says. "We get the kid to town somewhere. We see how it goes from there," and then he rolls down the window, and thick summer air hits me in the face, still cooler than the air is in the cab with all our stinking and fighting. I lean my head out the truck window like my momma always told me not to do and let the speed make me dizzy, let it turn my whole world upside down.

"Need something to eat," Maur says after a while, and downshifts us onto the grubby shoulder so Chez can take the driver's seat.

"You wanna keep the kid," I say, settling down beside her on the passenger seat once Maur's ducked into the sleeper for an instant soup. Maps crunch beneath my leg and I pull one carefully out from under.

She's silent for a minute. Then: "I want to find a newspaper. There's got to be something too far for people. They can't be wiring kids up in public and having them be *okay* with it."

"Dancer's right," I tell her, after my own long silence. "If he dies it could set off the nuke."

"We don't know that."

"We know it takes an explosion. There's gas in the back and the tank," I tell her, and she sets her jaw and shifts the truck clumsily into the middle lane, away from the spotty, broken streetlights.

We drive.

I thought I was in love with Chezley once, back when we were kids in the tiny townie high school they tore down when the scientists moved in. I cornered her on prom night and asked her to be my girl. She laughed, but not meanly, and went off to UNT instead. That was smarter for both of us, but I still like to watch the lines of her face sideways when she drives at night.

I keep the maps out in case she catches me. I plot our route past Provo, and watch the exits and beat-up signs, counting miles in my head. Fifty miles to Provo. Two hundred and nine point six to Idaho. Eleven hundred-thirty-six, barring detours and snack breaks and shift change, to the mountain.

Eleven hundred-thirty-five. Eleven hundred-thirty-four.

Maur's grumbling chewing sounds turn to snores in the sleeper. Dancer's bunched up beside him, face to the wall, stiff and probably pissed at having to share the top bunk instead of stretching out on the bottom. We turn off the highway twenty miles out of Provo and take the long way around to dodge the checkpoint, rattling along silent suburban roads that're mostly evacuated and going to weeds. Lawns spill out onto driveways in the dark. I roll the window up tight until we're around and tracing back routes to cross the Idaho border.

I fall asleep somewhere before the crossing and wake up with the sunrise coming in, burning my right arm hot where I've pillowed it on the window. Chezley's twitching a map out from under my other arm, crumpled and yanking at every little hair. "Mm," I grunt. Rub my eyes. "Where are we?"

"We oughta check on Priest," she says instead of an answer, and downshifts the engine into silence.

There's a bird or two calling in the browned-out countryside, yelling the sun up over a few curled-up trees. I take my piss into a roadside field and then follow Chez around the back to the trailer, covering my mouth against the devil and mosquitoes when I yawn. She bangs on it once, twice, before we haul the trailer door up high and fold down the little ramp that Dancer

hinged into the truck. "Morning, Priest," I tell him while I wait to get used to the dark.

The bomb wolf-whistles us good morning. I loosen my fists and follow Chez up the ramp into the trailer.

Priest's rolled up on the floor near the crates of food, halfway between the bomb and the gas. The bomb can't set off the gas, but there's something about things meant to explode that makes you not want to load them too close together. He's got his hand around the gun, loose and sleepy.

"Hey, Priest," I say, and dig into the big case of water to wash the nasty sleep-taste out of my mouth.

I don't see the red on the floor until I turn back around.

"Priest?" Chez says one more time, and her voice is shaking, 'cause we both no it won't do no good.

He doesn't move.

We didn't hear it, with all our arguin'. The sound of a shot going up into a mouth, through the soft bits of your skull and putting out a brain not twenty-five feet away. I lean forward and touch his outstretched hand. It gives like old chicken as his finger falls away from the trigger.

Bang bang, says the bomb. You're dead.

There's nothing to do about it. We wrap Priest up in a grey emergency blanket and wipe the floor best we can, and then gas up the truck and get on our way. Nobody damn well wants to sit bomb watch now, so we double it. Maur and I go in the two of us and lean against the trailer wall, looking away from the covered hump behind the gas cans. We put the gun up front by the door. It was stupid to think that we could stop a National Security checkpoint with one crappy old hunting rifle. Dancer and Chez close us in after a silent rationing-out of granola bars, fruit leather, instant noodles and ginkgo drinks, and the engine starts up again a minute later.

"The girls say where we're at?" I ask him when the food's finished up. There's no point in talking to Maur when there's still food to be had.

"Outside o' Boise," he grumbles. It's hard to hear. I keep myself from leaning forward at him.

"We should've been to Oregon by now."

"Yeah," he says, still mumble-quiet. "Looks like we had a wrong turn."

"Shit," I just let out, knowing full well it's my own fault for falling asleep at the maps, not knowing why the hell Chez didn't just wake me up again.

It's a day and a half trip to the mountain, if you take the interstates. Two and a half thousand miles. I sat down with Maur and plotted it out on paper maps in the back room of the bar after close time, so they wouldn't catch our looking on the internet ones.

That's if you take the interstates, though, where the checkpoints are. Where they pat you down and fingerprint-smudge your ID and stomp through truck trailers to count the goods.

The way we're going, it's thirty-five-hundred miles to the mountain, along the backroads, around the armed guards, taking dusty local highways almost all the way there. Almost two days straight of driving, so long as we never stop. We figured it'd take more like three, what with stopping to piss and change shifts and stretch out so nobody's foot cramps on the gas. That

was when we thought we could sleep in the trailer. Before the bomb started talking.

We didn't plan how we might cover shifts with only four. Or how much heat we might draw if we lost time having to back-track.

"Yeah," he repeats, not sounding like he's blaming, and slumps back into the darkness against the wall. A thin line of light peeks out at us where the door and the bed don't quite meet, and I wish we'd thought to bring more than a workman's flashlight barely big enough for reading. "Think the word's out?" he says even softer, after a minute, and I sit real still because I have this intuition that he's only talking this talk because it's dark enough we can't see the other's face.

"Dunno," I say, as calm as I can.

"Think we were stupid to try?"

I think about that.

We were smart about it. From the beginning, when Chezley's lab rat friend went to townie confession and told Priest all the things he'd seen scrubbing counters and mopping floors at the government labs behind their fences and lawns. We didn't put anything on paper, kept it all in the family, brought people in slow and didn't at all if we couldn't agree about trusting them. We set up routines. We mapped the patrols, and left on our road trip a full two nights before, met up with Chez's friend just before the New Mexico border, and he went back to work the next night just as slick as you please. Or at least that's what the plan was. We don't figure on knowing how it went on that end unless they throw us in prison and tell us. We'll find out when it's too late. Find out when it's done.

Anyway, nobody plans on going back.

"Yeah, maybe," I conclude, stirring the debris of instant noodles round and round in its chipped styrofoam cup. "But we got no choice anymore."

"Nuh-uh," he replies, and I draw my knees up and make up my mind to watch him.

A couple hours later Chezley's asleep. Dancer's at the wheel. Maur's hands are tapping morse code signals to himself on the sides of his knees, and I weigh him up the same way I count miles and conclude that he's way too fucking big to stop if he snaps. "Go take a break," I tell him, and the way he looks up at me just confirms I did right. His eyes are too bright. He looks hunted.

I wonder what he looked like back on his tours in the war. He came home like that, hunted. He sat in the back of the bar and drank alone for two years.

"You can't sit watch alone," he says, a slow too-casual drawl. He's suspicious. Of me. Alone with the bomb.

The bomb breathes loud in my ear. In and the ground's pulled up. Out and it rains down on everybody's heads. It sounds like an obscene phone caller.

"Send the kid in," I tell him, not even knowing I was thinking it 'til I say so. "Let him earn his keep."

"The kid?" he blinks. Maur's forgot he's still there, what with the lack of making noise. We never dropped him off in Provo after all.

"It'll let one of us sleep," I tell him, and he must buy it, 'cause after a moment that rabbit-light fades some and he gives the

back wall of the trailer a few good ringing slaps so the girls slow us down and come on out.

Maur goes out to talk to them, fussing around with the seam of his pants, and I sit back in the sudden bright light, alone for just a minute. Once the pixels clear out of my vision I catch them arguing on the rutted and unkept asphalt, catch a glimpse of tall grass and blue skies and trees.

For a second I don't know why we're doing this and I just want to go home.

That's right. You can't stop the bomb, says the bomb its-own-self. I put down my book.

"We ain't trying to stop the bomb, we're stopping *this* bomb." And that's it. I talked. I talked to it, and now if I ain't sure as hell lost for the rest of the goddamned day.

Made you, made you, the bomb giggles, sparking and shifting against the crating it's in as the wind tilts the trailer back and forth on its tires.

"You sure 'bout this?" Chez asks from outside, and her eyes are dark-smudged and empty with tired and a little more: she's pissed at herself about the wrong turn. I almost ask her why she didn't wake me up to do the maps except Dancer's behind her, and we've got no time for fights.

"Yup," I tell her, and try to sound cheerful as she boosts the broken-armed kid inside.

"What's your name?" I ask the kid once the door's closed shut and we're rolling again, the hum of the road rattling in my tail-bone no matter where I sit. The bomb hums 'Hail to the Chief' between turns of the wheels.

He doesn't say nothing. He looks at me squint-eyed and a little scared, back flat against the trailer wall and knees bent a little, ready to run.

"All right, I'll give you one," and imagine him whispering *Nick*. His voice is scratchy, scotch-and-cigarettes which sounds fucking odd and wrong from a little skinny kid's small throat, but that's the way it's gonna be.

"Nick, huh?" and he shifts, watching me like a little mouse. "Read a story with a rat named Nicodemus once. He and the other rats broke out of their lab and dug out a whole town under some farmer's field."

I don't know if that'll make any sense to him. I can't remember how long ago is before towns were unsafe, before the pesticide attacks meant fields couldn't be trusted to give up good food. He might not even know from rats. I'm not good with little kids. I can't think like they do.

"Yeah. You're a lab rat," I say, staring forward, and he lets out a little breath.

Where you going?

"Washington," I tell him, then "no, no, the state," when his eyes go bloodshot scared. He understood. He knows a word. "Not where the government is."

He wraps arms around his knees. He disappears into the flashlight-shadow until I can't see nothing but the tips of his long brown toes. Kids didn't grow up with toes like that in my generation. Ours were all bent from wearing shoes young. Our mamas didn't let us run barefoot.

All went to hell, down and down and down, the bomb sings, and I clear my throat loud.

He knows Washington. Or it's my imagination. Looping up,

twisting in on itself, making up things that aren't rightfully there. But if I'm gonna talk to voices in my head the kid'll beat hell out of the bomb.

"Lemme tell you a story," I say to him, settling back. "Lemme tell you about the rats and running away."

.....
We stop to change shift a half hour outside Challis, once my eyes are thick with gunk and my throat dry even after two-three bottles of water. I've got the kid – Nicodemus, Nick – nice and calmed down, even got him to eat a granola bar which he does like a little animal, picking and hiding and nibbling away, and it all goes to hell the second Dancer opens the big trailer door and fixes him with her pissy glare.

"Get him in the sleeper," she says, already turning around.

"What?"

"I'm coming in back here."

Oh great, Nick says or I think, as she climbs into the trailer and I lever myself onto feet that're half-asleep. Dancer's always halfway to a mood, and the way she stalks up and sits five steps from the bomb with that crap old gun, it looks like she found the other half. "Let's go then," I say to the kid, and hold out a hand to him. Cautious, moving his eyes back and forth like a wild thing, he takes it and follows.

"What's up her ass?" I ask Chez, when we get around front, and she shakes her head. Her eyes are all red and bad-looking, and I can't tell if it's glare from the road. One thing we forgot to pack: sunglasses.

"Mad about the kid still being here. Doesn't want me to call the papers," she says back short, and takes little fight-or-flight Nick by the hand, careful. "C'mon," in a totally different voice, the kind of voice your mama had when you were a littlest kid. "Let's get you a juice box and you can play in the back."

The kid looks kinda dubiously back into the sleeper: Maur's asleep on the bottom bunk, on account of the top bunk not being strong enough to hold up under him. "Who's gonna do maps?" I ask her, before thinking maybe I shouldn't have.

And yeah, her mouth gets tight and small in the long lines of her face. "I'll wake Maur up if I need to," she says, and I scoot back for a piss and to the trailer before I get in fights with everyone too.

The country's changed. I get a good look at it before climbing back in the stuffy old trailer. It's mountains now for real, the craggy, snow-capped ones all covered with pine you see in the movies, not the soft green things we saw before. There's a little creek running by the roadside, dipping towards us before ducking back into the woods. I stick my hands in it and it runs cold, scrub them and my face for a good minute before going back inside. It makes me feel cleaner. It makes something in my head turn sharper, under all the dark and tired.

"How many miles?" I ask Dancer coming in.

"Going down to seven hundred," she says, easing against a beat-up pillow. "Shouldn't be too long now."

Running out of time, whispers the bomb. I don't look at it. Dancer's mouth firms up, and she doesn't look either. I put my hand down on the cold floor to stop it from shaking, because it means she *heard*. It's not just talking to me. I mean, I knew it wasn't just talking to me. But she heard, and if that's two of us, it can't yank our chains like it is.

"No, we're not," I say, ballsy like I haven't been since Chezley set the date for our leaving, leaning over me and whispering in my ear like it was a come-on on the crowded Thursday night shift.

"What?" Dancer says, head coming up.

"Running out of time. We're not."

Yes you are, says the bomb.

"Yes we are," whispers Dancer.

It takes a second for the words to hit my brain. I'm not running fast now; my own engine's failing. But when they do: "You agreed with it," I say, mouth dry.

"What?"

Huh? mocks the bomb.

But no: "You think it's right." I catch the little head-twitch that tells me she's lying. The looking away. A person doesn't want to meet your eye when they're trying to feed you a lie.

"I got no fucking idea what you're talking about," she enunciates, every word sharp and mean, but she glances over to it when she does. She looks over to the bomb.

Two on one, boy, drawls the bomb.

"Shut up –" I holler, and I'm charging toward it when she grabs my arms. "Fucking loudmouthed traitor *bitch* –" and I fall back, land on the gun.

Squeeze.

The shot goes off, exploding into the wall.

Dancer shrieks and I think I do too except it's all submerged in the rifle bang and the scream of brakes being pumped over and over as the truck fishtails, shudders, slows down with boxes and blankets flying everywhere back and forth.

"Oh Jesus," Dancer whispers, and I shove the gun away from me, down the dark trailer until it settles like an offering at the foot of the tarp-covered bomb.

"Shit, I didn't mean that, my hand slipped on it, I swear –"

The trailer rumbles again and a stack of boxes topples, lands on my head and arms and legs, and it's all shouting and swearing again until the engine cuts out and we're sitting in the quiet, in the dark.

It's silent, beautiful silent for about five seconds, and then the trailer door comes up and Maur and Chezley come charging in. "What the *fuck* –" she's gasping, and Maur's hands are up in front of him and ready, thumbs outside the fists like they teach you in the army so you don't break them the first time you throw a punch.

"He *shot* at me," Dancer breathes, and she scoots the fuck out of the trailer and onto the gravel of the old, empty road.

I look at Dancer, at Chez, at Maur, at Nicodemus standing just a little behind, looking off into the forest like he's thinking about a cut-and-run. They don't want to talk about the bomb. Even if we all hear it, they're gonna pretend until doomsday that it's not been saying a word, not whispering into the backs of everyone's ears.

"It was a mistake," I say, head down, and Nicodemus gives me a look that cuts to the centre of my guts. *No mistake*, he says, scratchy like an old record and kinda sad.

"You're off bomb duty," Chez says, cool like a little kids' teacher can be when something's gone terribly wrong. I duck out of the trailer, get my feet on the pitted highway.

"I'm sorry." Again.

She won't meet my eye.

Made you, made you, whispers the narrow dark.

I crawl over the passenger seat into the sleeper, hands shaky, jerking back the dirty sheets with arms that don't want to do what I say. I don't remember when I last got a nap. When we took the wrong turn, I think. About a day.

I kick my shoes off and wrap up under the sheets, try to pretend that I don't see Maur watching me from the driver's seat, where he's changing the mirrors to his army-trained height. He's looking like I looked at him back in the trailer, at his knee-tapping, finger-jitter SOS. Like I'm gonna snap.

The bomb's getting to me.

You can't stop the bomb comes muffled through the back wall, and I put the pillow over my head, 'cause it's true.

I sleep a long time. Or a long time by this count, with four shifts instead of five, and one less bed for the having on account of Nicodemus being with us. Five-six hours, and by the time I wake up and wash the gunk out of my mouth with tepid water, ask "How many miles?" the sun's falling fast and we're running on asphalt again.

"Four fifty," Maur's voice comes soft out of the driver's side. "Montana."

I stretch, and everything hurts. I'm tired: my neck and head are just begging to lie themselves back down.

"You need me up?" I croak.

"Uh-huh," he grunts, and I force myself up to sitting, up to the front, and to the maps.

At mile three-seventy-three, Maur glances at the overhead signs, rusting off their frames. "Truck stop ahead."

"Yeah?" I say, crackly. Startled into talking.

"I wanna stop," he says quiet, that intent look on his face that large men can do so well, like stone giants knowing nothing's gonna touch them hard enough to hurt.

"You sure?" I ask, just to hedge, because he wouldn't ask if he wasn't totally sure. He just looks at me, doesn't answer. And I pause for a minute, and nod.

"What's going on?" the girls ask when I let them out of the back, trembly-kneed from sitting down too long, from bomb shift, which nobody wants to talk about.

"Truck stop," I say short. They're still looking at me like I'm gonna snap. "Maur wanted a real stop."

I turn and let them argue it out between themselves, go to double-check the locks. Nicodemus peeks out the sleeper doorway at me; I lean through the rolled-down window.

"Gotta stay here," I tell Nick, and he looks at me like he might actually understand, huddled up in the blankets on the top bunk of the sleeper. "I'll bring you a chocolate bar, promise."

By the time I'm back the argument's mostly done, and Chez is turning to Dancer; I only catch the last. "— coming?" she says, kinda resigned. Beat.

Dancer shakes her head. "Gotta fill up. And gonna switch our plates," she says, jerking her head over to the two other trucks in the lot.

"Smart," Chez says, and follows me inside.

I walk in shaky-legged, and control that reflex that wants to flinch the first time we see other people again. It's not even frightening other people: teenagers working a limp pair of fast-food

booths in beige striped uniforms, a drooping pair of children being prodded around by their tired, round-shouldered parents. A couple of fellas in the corner, picking at cardboard-stiff french fries, lingering each time their fingers touch over the tray. But it feels like they're all looking at us, sizing us up against America's Most Wanted and bulletins on the news networks.

"What's wrong?" Chez says, jogs my elbow. I almost hit her out of surprise.

"Been too long from people," I choke out, and flee for the men's room.

There's a bathroom, a real bathroom, even though the truck stop's falling down and half-deserted. I look at my face in the cloudy mirror and it's pale, a few days' dirty beard scruffing a chin that was never too good-looking to start with. I look like a refugee. I look like I'm dead.

I wash my hands. I wash my face. The water's cloudy too, and full of grit. Two days, I tell myself. Two days and two nights, and you're already thinking like a criminal.

"Well. There was no going back anyway," I tell my reflection, and then check guilty-faced for feet under the bathroom stall doors.

I come back out and Chezley's at the door, staring a straight line into a neon-lit, wood-paneled corner. It's Maur, big man huddled small, leaning against the wall with something dark in his hand. *Gun*, my head tells me first, the part of my head that's been talking too much with the bomb. But no. Worse, maybe.

Phone.

Chezley meets my eye for an edged moment. And then she opens the door and runs.

She climbs in the truck and the engine lags, rebounds and spits before it starts to life, door slamming behind her, seatbelt left dangling to the side even though we've been so careful all the way through not to get pulled over and ruined for a little thing like traffic tickets. "Go!" she snaps, and I run the rest of the way to the passenger door, yank myself in as the wheels're already moving.

Maur, at the pay phone. Slipping the quarter in and dialing.

The wheels squeak as Chez pulls out of the lot, onto the bumpy ramp and back onto the old highway. She merges fast, edging lane to lane into the fastest one and gunning it for a full half hour, until we're well away from the truck stop and gotta move to make our turn, to duck back off the main road before the state border checkpoint and the inevitable inspection.

Maybe he was just calling his brother. Or his girl, stuck back in Marion with no idea what we were planning, where we were going, why the National Security men have probably shown up at her door. Maybe he just wanted to say goodbye.

I don't know how we're gonna do it with three.

We get behind.

Dancer goes over the maps again and again, swearing under her breath without being angry, just tired. Chez goes in with the bomb. We shut her in with the rifle across her legs, her little chin all scrunched up and brave so I know that she hates it, hates it to death. I can't picture Chezley shooting anyone. Dancer takes us back into Idaho with a few calls for water and exits, and otherwise we don't talk until they switch, and Chez runs us into Washington State just as silent and hard.

I can't sleep. All my half-nightmares have patrol lights in them, men bigger than me dressed all in black with sunglass-shade eyes. I sit with the kid when I'm supposed to be sleeping, and show him the old maps and papers.

"That's an A," I tell him, pointing to it with the bruised-up, bit-down fingernail. He looks at me blankly. "A's for airway."

I can't read, he says, gentle like Chezley's teacher voice, with all the sweet little pity in the world. *I don't even know words except for Washington.*

"Yeah, I suppose you don't," I sigh, and crumple it up. "Thought there was nothing to lose for tryin', though."

S'good to try, he agrees, old bluesman's voice in a little kid's body, and bats the ball of paper across the sleeper floor. The truck turns on a curve against the four a.m. sky. The ball rolls right damn back.

"I dunno," I say, and kick the old map back to the sleeper doorway.

No?

"No," I say, choosing my words careful. I don't recall what I thought about right and wrong when I was ten-eleven years old, and I sat in church every Sunday and a schoolroom where right and wrong were beat into us by Maur's old aunt from nine to three on weekdays. "The problem is that...well, I don't know if us stealing the bomb and dumping it in the mountain is doing right."

Why not? the kid says in a real small voice. I look up into the front of the cab. Chezley's still driving, leaning forward against the oncoming road as if it's a breeze come to meet her.

"It won't matter, in the end. Maybe it was just something on impulse we did to make us feel better. Maybe if we really meant it we'd have stayed low, stayed quiet and made change another way instead of blowing all our chances from here on forward to make some difference. To be something good for real, not just...bomb's a symbol. It's not the world."

I lean back on the bunk and feel the wet trickle down to the corner of my mouth. I take it in with my tongue, swallow. I don't know why people say cryin' tastes like salt. It always tastes clean to me.

"You can't stop the bomb," I say, looking down at the dirty sleeper floor. "You can't take these things back once they're out there. We're making a pretty picture but this ain't gonna mean shit."

Maybe you've gotta see it different, the kid says after a moment, and Chezley changes lanes, takes us jerkily into the passing lane of the first four-lane road we've seen in hours.

"How's different?" I whisper so she doesn't turn around.

Is it gonna kill people? Nicodemus asks, fretting away at the metal clips holding his bandage together until I lightly slap his hand. It crumples him in the corner like a wounded rabbit. Something about the fear on his face makes me want to slap that away too.

"Yeah," I tell him. My trigger fingers shakes. I put my own hand back in my lap. "Thousands and millions of them."

So you oughta burn it, he says, clear and simple, and rolls over onto his good side to sleep.

The sleeper smells like piss: Nicodemus's dirty sweat and our own and the jars we brought so we don't have to stop in the home stretch combined. I go up front and open the window just

a crack, press my face against it to breathe in the cool, smoky air. It's not complicated out there. Night, and day. Good air you can breathe and shit air you can't. It's only in here things got complicated, it's only when you start thinking in those loops and twists and not like a little kid who don't know one word except *Washington* can see.

"How many miles?" I ask Chez after a while.

"Maybe one-fifty," she whispers just above the engine and the wind and the night.

"I'll spot you," I tell her, and pat her knee, friend-like, not a come-on. "C'mon. Take a nap. I'll drive."

Going up to the crater's not allowed. It wasn't even in the days before the road checkpoints, the passes, and the bomb. But we've broken enough rules already that I can't feel bad about one more, and the truck thunders into the old national park.

Here, there's guards.

They post 'em on all the entrances to the national parks now; the few patches of land where you can live off the earth if you're inclined to be on the run. They're always rooting some insurgency out of Yosemite or Yellowstone or the endless caves in the Grand Canyon. They check ID now coming into the parks. But we're close enough.

I gun it.

The little stick of a barrier they've got across the road just snaps against the grille, bounces off the windshield and it's hard to see for a minute, but then we're in the clear, running up the roads, Chezley calling turns all tense and rough with the highlighted map in her hands. There's gunfire behind us – I can't hear which direction – but different kinds of guns, automatics and then *bang bang*, the sharp clear call of that goddamned useless rifle. Dancer's shooting back at them, stuffing ammo into the rifle's mouth.

For a second I feel like shit for thinking she'd turn and throw in with the bomb.

The shots stop after a bit, both sides. "We outrun 'em?" Chez says, leaning at the window.

I risk a peek into my side mirror. "Nobody behind." I'm grinning. There's a big stupid grin on my face that cracks the sunburn I didn't even know I had. In front of us, I can see the mountain, dragonlike under its big smoke signal.

Thirty miles. Twenty-nine.

The road runs out. We hit the trails.

I keep the windows up against the branches, and even then we can hear the truck busting up the trails, splintering trees and bushes and crushing what good's left in the land out of it as we turn and turn and climb. The wheels rumble, tires crunching, and the farther up we go the heavier and heavier the bomb gets, the whole trailer dragging us back, dragging down the mountain back into the bad old world of everyone who doesn't want to stop the bomb.

"Almost there, almost there," Chez breathes, and I'm breathing it with her, little rhythmic prayer.

No, you can't. You can't stop the bomb, comes muffled from behind the sleeper, the trailer, where it might have been a roar before it met crating and rope and metal and the whistling air between the trailer wall and the hitch and ourselves.

"Yes we can," I whisper, and take another turn.

There's another noise now, the *bap-bap-bap* of helicopters, and I crane my head up and around the driver's-side window before Chez puts a hand on my locked steering arm. "Don't worry," she says, almost shameful. "They're with us."

I slow it down, take another ditch right up in the teeth. The helicopters are bright red and green. They have numbers on the sides. "Channel Four," I mutter. "You did call the news."

"Yeah," she says unhappily.

"Why?" and the bomb laughs again, 'cause I have to stuff my tongue against my teeth to keep from yelling again. We're so close, so very close –

She gives me a *look*, the kinda look I'd expect from Dancer tellin' me how I'm stupider than dirt. "This isn't any good unless people know about it," she says, and then her voice shakes, and she slips out of that prissy UNT accent back into Marion, like she talked when she was a little kid. "I ain't throwing my life away for nothing."

The bomb yells up the first half of the mountain, and nobody's on our tail. Chez slaps a hard hand against the back of the sleeper, and three raps come back: steady, strong, half-drowned out by the noise of dying branches. Dancer's okay back there, I realize, and lean down over the wheel.

"How many miles?" I ask Chez, and she traces a finger on a pinpoint piece of map.

"Ten," she whispers, hands drunken-jerky and wild.

It begs when we hit eight-point-three. *Please, you're doing it wrong, if you'd just turn around and push it down and press the little button –*

I ignore it. I'm laughing now, laughing this mean little chuckle that I didn't think could ever come out of my own mouth. *I win*, that laugh says. I win and you lose.

Nicodemus pokes his head out of the sleeper, the top of his matted hair just showing in my rearview. *That's right*, he whispers. *We're right. It's wrong. That's how you keep driving and stop the bomb.* It sings in my head like a nursery rhyme.

Five miles. Four, and then three, and two, and one.

And we stop.

This isn't gonna stop nobody from building more bombs, it whimpers.

I throw the clutch into reverse. The trailer door bangs: up, and down. Dancer getting clear. The truck hisses like a wounded cat.

You don't know if the other team wrecked their notes.

They did.

You didn't take care of those scientists. They'll make up new bombs.

Not in Marion they won't.

You shoulda just aimed and pressed the button.

I know that bombs can't talk. I know the voice that comes out of the metal and ceramic and wire, that filthy radiation heart is really a voice from inside me. But I'm not a religious man, and I don't know of good ways to clean out filth from a person's heart that don't involve god.

I do know how to back a trailer into a mountaintop.

It dangles for a minute over the crater, dragging the cab with it stubborn as I grab my ballcap and jump out the door. Chez clambers after, onto rock that burns through my sneakers, air that's more like steam coming in than anything that's good to breathe. "Done," she whispers as the truck teeters over the crater.

"Done," and I reach out to hold her shaky hand, before I look back into the cab and see Nicodemus.

I got no words for that moment. It's the moment when your heart sinks into your feet and through the rock, and burns up like everything else does when it gets near the spit of that volcano. It's finding out your dog died while you were away at school at ten years old, and you're never gonna get him back, gonna sleep all by yourself on that narrow little single bed every night, forever, until you finally find yourself a woman who maybe someday will love you that much, trust you that much. It's knowing that warmth is going away, and that no matter what you did, it's over. It's all over.

"Nick, you gotta get out!" I'm yelling. I'm running. The truck tilts. I won't reach it in time. "C'mon, you gotta come out of there –"

He huddles in deeper, arms around his knees between the driver and passenger seat, staring up at the world that's coming apart in thunder and fire.

The news choppers hover. They press in deeper, close.

"He doesn't understand," she says, her face dirty sick brown, her hands shaking in front of her. "He's just a little kid."

She looks down at them. Looks at her two hands.

"Chez, no –" and then Chezley runs back and dives into the dangling truck.

He doesn't scream when the trailer detaches, fishtailing off the hitch and plunging the whole thing down, down into the hot rock of the blackened, crusty bowl. Tough little kid doesn't scream, and I imagine the tiny explosion deep down in the rock as his tongue burns away and his heart stops, setting off the chip they shoved up into his skull and the explosives they put where the appendix used to be.

I don't know if Chezley screams. I imagine her silent, like heroes are. Or laughing: the bomb takes her into the hot bubbling guts of the earth and she laughs: *ha ha ha. We did it. We stopped the bomb.*

I don't have maps no more, and really, that's it. That's it and I'm tired. Dancer and I stand at the edge of the volcano's mouth and watch our U-Haul die.

The trailer burns clean and simple, just like divine punishment in a little kid's world, eaten quietly by the fire as it sinks lazily down into the dark.

.....
In the dream the choppers come down low. They come down with their cameras and fancy-hairstyle men in shirt and tie, and circle around us filming, commenting, broadcasting their theories fast ahead of the army, before the government can wipe us away.

"Why did you do it?" shouts Channel Four, close enough to hear, far enough away so we don't pitch 'em in the volcano too.

Because Chezley asked me to, and I could never say no to the grace she got in the lines of her neck when that woman felt something was right or wrong. "Cause the people down in Marion don't want no bombs," I yell out instead. "We're honest folk. We don't want no part of making people die."

That's what she'd want me to say.

In the dream I see a crowd standing at the edges of the tree-line, way far off down, too far for me to see so I know I must be dreaming. They've got rifles in their hands and stained bandanas

on their heads. They look like schoolteachers and mechanics.

We can't take you with us, their dirty, sunburnt faces say. Maybe if you hadn't called the helicopters. Could've lived to fight another day in the wilderness with us.

They sound sorry. I nod to them, and imagine a hundred thousand radios sputtering with breaking news.

That's okay.

They show up after half an hour in ranger trucks, those bouncing jeeps with no doors, armed to the eyeballs with automatics and gas masks and men in hazmat suits.

We don't have our gun no more. If we did, I'd think about that life National Security's been trying to stamp out: the rebels in the woods, fighting off the government, living off the land. But I can't catch no deer with my hands and I'm tired, so we just put up our hands when they come and don't say boo as they throw us across the hoods of their cars and tie on the plastic cuffs.

"What was in there?" they ask, "Huh, pigs? What the hell you terrorists throwing in volcanoes?"

"The bomb," I say, crooked-smiled, and Dancer laughs. They cuff her across the face until she spits blood.

They march us down the mountain, one at each arm, and I know that's how they'll march us for the rest of our short lives. One at each arm like dancers through the streets of crumbling towns, in the victory floats at Independence Day parades, out

there in front of the field-rotted crops with our eyes screwed shut and tongues cut short.

It won't matter. We did right. We did right and they'll do wrong, and little children'll know the difference when they see it on Channel Four. Little kids who can't yet talk, growing up in Marion, Texas and not having to worry about their mamas and papas falling to the whisper of allegiance to the bomb. Kids who can grow up clean and write newspapers about how it's wrong to run wild straight-toed and feral, who'll have proper shoes and know their ABCs, and not know nothing about the dirt of other countries or laboratories or blood, even if they don't get to go to UNT and get themselves their education. It's not always good to be smart. Sometimes it's good to be clean.

But now – now, they parade us through the riot barriers, through crowds of fingerprinted-and-ID-checked campers on supervised holiday who stare at our dirty clothes, our burning eyes.

Past small children staring by the roadside, too young to know *Washington*, greedily pulling the wings off flies.

Leah Bobet lives and works in a little apartment in Toronto built on consecrated ground. Her fiction has appeared most recently in *Strange Horizons*, *The Mammoth Book of Extreme Fantasy* and *Clockwork Phoenix*, and her poetry has been nominated for the Rhysling and Pushcart Prizes. She is, like many, working on a novel. This is her first appearance in *Interzone*.

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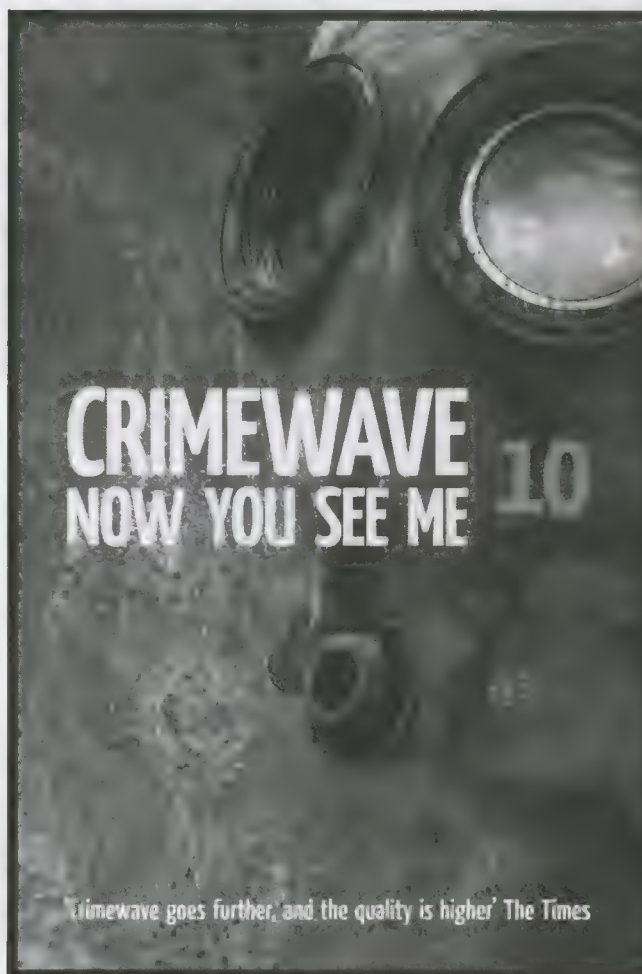
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ILLUSTRATED BY DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY

MEMORY DUST

GARETH L. POWELL

"If you pull this off, you're going to be rich," his agent said. They were in an anonymous hotel suite, where she'd joined him for an early breakfast. The room looked out over the ocean. Sunlight sparkled on the water. Caesar wore slippers and a white robe tied at the waist; his agent wore a grey suit.

"I'm not doing this for the money, Jennifer."

He took a sip of coffee, black and sweet. After a moment, he said: "Have you spoken to Amber this morning?"

Jennifer shook her head. Her eyes were the same colour as the sky. "Your daughter's still angry, I'm afraid. She still thinks you're going to kill yourself."

Caesar pushed back in his chair. He was cranky because he hadn't slept well. His back hurt, and he'd had that dream again, the one he'd had every night for the past three years.

"Well, that can't be helped," he muttered.

He got dressed and took a rickshaw to the civilian spaceport. The narrow streets heaved with rush hour traffic. By the time he got there, the reporters were waiting for him. They'd been tracking him for weeks, in the build up to this final, record breaking flight.

He pushed past them in dark glasses, ignoring their hovering cameras, brushing off their shouted questions, not slowing until he reached his ship.

.....
The Red Shark was a tough, streamlined wedge with a thick heat shield, and paint scoured to ash by the pitiless fires of hyperspace. He walked up the cargo ramp into her belly without looking back. He'd been stuck on this worthless planet for three long years, growing old and tired and soft. He could hardly wait to get airborne again, to open the throttle and feel the kick of



the engine, the giddy freedom of the up-and-out.

He double-checked the contents of the stolen crate in the cargo hold. Then he made his way to the spherical Star Chamber at the ship's heart, where he found Maya Castillo. In her late forties and an accomplished jumper in her own right, she was to be his co-pilot on this final trip.

"How are we doing?" he said.

She turned and smiled. The shoulders of her khaki fatigues were emblazoned with the logos of the organisations sponsoring the flight.

"Pre-flight looks good," she said. He took the seat beside her, checked the readouts. All the lights were green. *The Red Shark* throbbed with potential.

"Spin her up," he said.

They quit the atmosphere at full throttle, leaving a roiling wake of turbulence, moving so fast the news cameras had a hard time following. In the Star Chamber, Caesar watched the ground fall away without regret.

"I should call my daughter," he said. He opened a secure channel. The phone rang for over a minute. When she finally answered, Amber looked harassed and tired, ready for an argument.

Caesar spoke first, before she could start. "It's all in your name," he said. "The media rights, the sponsorship, everything. It's all

in your name. It's all for you and the kids. I've left instructions. You'll be taken care of."

Amber pushed a hand back through her hair. "We don't want your money, Dad."

"Sure you do. Call my agent, she has the details."

He forwarded her Jennifer's electronic business card, and saw her eyes flick down as it arrived in the corner of her screen.

When she looked up, she said, "The police were here just now, looking for you."

Caesar nodded. He knew they were after the crate.

"Don't worry," he said. "Just call Jennifer, and let her deal with it."

"But what are you going to do?"

He tried to shrug but the safety straps were too tight.

"I'll be okay," he said. He rubbed his forehead. "You just look after yourself, and the kids."

"Dad." Amber bit her lip. "You're not coming back, are you?"

Caesar glanced across at Maya.

"No, honey," he said. "No, I'm not."

Five minutes later, they were in flat space, ready to jump. Maya shunted control of the Bradley engines to his workstation.

"Ready when you are," she said.

Random jumping was a dangerous sport. It was a pilot throwing his ship into hyperspace without specifying a destination, just



to see where he'd end up. It was illegal in some parts of known space, prime entertainment in others – and the stakes were always high.

Caesar Murphy was one of the better pilots, in that he was still alive. In the random jumping community, he was something of a legend, having made more successful jumps than anyone else – almost fifty since turning professional.

Before that, he'd worked his way across the sky, serving time on freighters and troop transports, slogging all the way from the core to the rim and back again, saving up the money to buy his own ship. Over the years, he'd hauled every sort of cargo. He'd seen the sun rise on a dozen different worlds, had his nose broken in a bar brawl, and married twice. He'd lost his first wife to infidelity, the second – Amber's mother – to complications during childbirth. There had been nothing permanent in his life. He remembered it as one long series of farewells. Even now, at the end of his career, he was saying goodbye to his only daughter.

His fingers hesitated over the controls.

Maya said, "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

Caesar took a deep breath. He thought about the crate in the cargo hold, and the creature within. Three years ago, he'd found it curled in the ruins of an ancient citadel, on a dying planet circling a swollen star. It had been wounded and afraid, helpless in the gritty black dust that blew across the plateau where the citadel stood. Not knowing what else to do, he'd rescued it, brought it back and turned it over to the authorities as soon as he landed.

Since then, he'd been dreaming about it. It had haunted his sleep. Always the same dream, over and over, night after night. Which was why he'd used his money and fame to steal it back from the laboratory where it was being studied, why this last flight was actually a cover for his real intent: to put the thing back where it had come from.

He set his jaw and engaged the engines.

"You know I don't have any choice," he said.

Travelling through hyperspace was rough, like battering through white-hot plasma – the kind of ordeal only specially toughened, streamlined ships could endure.

In *The Red Shark*, Caesar and Maya rode the turbulence strapped into their couches, neither speaking, intent on their instruments.

After an hour, they came out on the ragged edge of the galactic disc, where the stars were few and far between.

While Maya scanned the ship's systems for damage, Caesar went aft, to check on the cargo.

"How is it?" she asked him over the intercom.

At the bottom of the crate, the creature lay wrapped around itself in a knot of folded tentacles, like an octopus without a head. It smelled of mould and stagnant water. There were biopsy scars on its wrinkled skin, wire tags fixed to its legs.

"It looks okay," he said. At the sound of his voice, the creature shivered and shrank in on itself, its skin changing in colour from light brown to sickly marble.

Caesar backed away. It had suffered enough already and he didn't want to alarm it. Instead, he returned to the Star Chamber.

"Do you have any idea where we are?" he asked, sliding into his couch.

Maya tapped her screen and a projection of the local sky appeared on the Chamber's curved wall.

"As far as I can tell, we're here," she said, using her cursor to highlight a small blue star a few light years in from the rim.

"And where's our target?"

Maya moved her hand to the very edge of the Abyss.

"Over here."

Every night it was the same. He stood before the citadel again, looking out over the remains of a city – a half-submerged, swampy metropolis, its ruined buildings inhabited by multi-limbed creatures like the one curled up in the hold of his ship, all squirming together in the streets, skins rippling through every colour of the visible spectrum.

Instinctively, he knew this was how the planet had been before the black dust started falling from the sky.

He saw it then, the dust, blowing down as he remembered it, settling like a layer of fine soot, sticking and clinging to every living thing. He sensed its malevolence; saw the tentacled creatures thrashing about unable to breathe as it smothered them. He saw plants wither, trees die.

And then, when there was nothing left alive, the black dust gathered itself into a single glowering ball and turned its cold, inhuman attention on him...

Caesar woke with a shout, heart hammering. Beside him, Maya stirred. She was used to his nightmares. "Go back to sleep," she said.

His hands were shaking. He slid out from under the blanket and picked his trousers off the deck. Then he leaned down and kissed her warm shoulder.

"See you later," he said. He padded up to the Star Chamber and made himself a coffee, adding extra sweetener.

They were in orbit around the planet where he'd found the octopoid creature – the planet from his dream. It had taken them two further jumps and more than twenty-four hours to get here, and his back ached from sitting in the pilot's couch.

He perched on the edge of an instrument console, sipping his coffee. The walls of the spherical chamber displayed a 360° external view fed from cameras on the ship's hull, and when he looked down, he could see the planet's baked rocky surface passing beneath his feet, all brown and grey.

Somewhere down there, he thought, are the answers I need.

Half an hour later, they began their descent.

Impatient and uncomfortable, he brought them in hard, scrawling a fiery trail across the empty sky, dropping down to the plateau beside the ruined citadel.

Then, with *The Red Shark* still bouncing on its landing shocks, he unbuckled his straps and led Maya down to the cargo hold, to suit up.

She had to help him into his pressure suit. He wasn't as limber as he used to be.

"I'm really glad you're here," he said.

He bent forward stiffly to let her snap his helmet into place, and then watched as she fastened her own, tucking her long hair

into the neck ring of her suit.

"When this is all over, we'll go somewhere quiet and start a new life," she said.

She reached forward and squeezed his hand.

"Are you ready?"

She went to the back of the cargo bay and opened the ramp. Hot, dry air blew in, too thin for them to breathe.

Together, they manhandled the crate down onto the rocky ground, and opened it. Inside, the creature shivered, still folded in on itself.

Using her gloved hand to shade her eyes from the swollen sun, Maya said: "What's wrong with it?"

Caesar didn't reply straight away. This was as far as his plan went. Instead, he walked a few paces to the edge of the plateau, to get a better look at the ruins of the city in the wasteland beneath.

"Just give it some space," he said.

He could see scattered heaps of rubble that corresponded to the positions of the buildings in his dream. The swamp they sat in had dried long ago, but there were still a few hardy plants clinging on here and there between the stones, sucking what little moisture they could from the hot, rust-coloured soil.

Beside him, the citadel itself lay like a smashed chandelier, its silent ancient towers fallen, its stone walls crumbled. He picked his way over to a large chunk of masonry that had fallen from the archway above the main entrance. Up close, he could see the coarseness of the stonework, the telltale marks made by the flint tools used in its construction.

"It's moving," Maya said over the radio. Her voice sounded loud in his earpiece. He turned to see her standing by the empty crate, its former occupant using a single tentacle to pull itself laboriously across the rough ground, its skin changing hue as it adapted to its surroundings, trying to blend in.

"Let it go," he said. He looked up at the citadel's battered walls and felt his heart beat faster as he saw the thin black haze hovering in the air above them.

Maya joined him, picking her way through the debris, and they watched the octopoid pull itself into the shade of the building's entrance, as if seeking shelter from the haze overhead – a haze which was thickening by the second, turning into a vast dark cloud that threatened to blot out the harsh light of the red sun.

"We should get back to the ship," Caesar said. On his last trip, the dust had been blowing around like a sandstorm, and he had no desire to get caught in it again. Already, there were a few black motes drifting down from the sky like dirty snowflakes.

Frowning, Maya put her gloved hand out to catch one.

"What is it?"

"Leave it."

He turned to look at *The Red Shark*. As he did so, the dust began to fall – slowly at first, then faster and faster, until it became a black sleet that quickly obscured the ship and the edge of the rock-strewn plateau beyond.

"Caesar, what's happening?" Maya said, brushing at her suit, trying to keep it clean.

Caesar didn't answer. There was dust clinging to his faceplate, and he felt queasy as he remembered the way the creatures in his dream had suffocated. He took Maya by the shoulder and

shoved her in the direction of the ship. "We have to get out of here," he said.

They started scrambling over the rocks. She was younger than him and could move faster over the difficult terrain.

"Keep going, get to the ship," he panted, not wanting to hold her back.

He looked up. Overhead, the sky had darkened to a thunderous black, and the falling dust had become a blizzard. He stumbled on, wiping his faceplate every few steps until, eventually, he lost his footing. His boot skidded on a loose rock and he went down hard, landing on his hands and knees with a cry. His ankle felt broken. The pain brought tears to his eyes.

"Maya," he said.

He rolled on to his side. He couldn't see her. The dust was falling in clumps now, like volcanic ash, obscuring everything.

Sweating and cursing, he pushed himself up into a sitting position. He couldn't walk and he couldn't see his ship.

He looked around. The citadel was still close behind him. He would have to shelter there until Maya found him. With gritted teeth, he pulled himself towards its stone steps, his injured leg trailing behind.

Once inside, he found the octopoid had left tracks and scuff marks in the chippings and broken plaster on the citadel's floor, leading him to a tight, sloping tunnel extending down into the bedrock beneath.

Carefully, Caesar lit a torch from his pocket and lowered himself into the hole, sliding down on his backside, trying not to jar his ankle or scrape his helmet.

After a few metres, the walls widened and he found himself in an underground vault. The ceiling was a dome maybe two metres at its highest point. There were strange hieroglyphs hacked into its smooth sides, stylised representations of multi-limbed creatures that seemed to writhe and dance as he moved his torch.

At the centre, the eight-legged creature from his cargo hold had pulled itself up onto a carved pedestal with a flat, wide top like a bird bath. As it settled itself into place, the floor shook.

Still on his knees, Caesar fell forward into the room as a solid stone slab ground across the vault's only entrance, sealing it – and him – from the world outside.

He spent a long time trying to find a way out. He pushed at the slab blocking the door. He tried to call Maya on the radio. He felt his way around the walls, and he shouted at the creature on the plinth, all to no avail. Eventually, exhausted and in pain, he slid down onto his haunches, breathing hard, his breath misting the inside of his faceplate.

"That damn dream," he said. If it hadn't been for the dream, he'd have stuck to his plan – to kick the creature out the airlock and get airborne again as quickly as possible – instead of wasting time in the ruins, trying to see the shadow of a long-vanished city.

He rapped his knuckles against his helmet, wishing he could take it off, longing for an excuse to bust the seals and just *get it all over with*. Instead, he crawled over to the central plinth and looked up at the mass of pale tentacles resting at the top, limbs all curled in on themselves like the flabby fingers of a dead fist.

He reached a gloved hand and brushed a wire tag hanging

from one of the creature's legs. The lab he'd stolen it from had given up their attempts to communicate with it and had been preparing to dissect it. Its skin was scratched and bruised where they'd taken samples, reminding him of the way his hands had looked on the day after his first bar fight, all those years ago, on some forsaken ball of mud somewhere down near the core.

He'd been seventeen, maybe eighteen years old at the time, working his first military contract. A raw young kid with too much swagger and not enough sense, all puffed up in his uniform, and just stupid enough to challenge two drunken stevedores in a downtown bar.

Thinking about it now, kneeling in front of the plinth, he smiled. He'd had his ass kicked on half a dozen planets since then, but he'd never forgotten that first time.

"What do we do now?" he said through his suit's external speaker. On its perch, the creature shivered at the sound of his voice, drawing further into itself.

"How long do we have to stay here?" he said. His suit wasn't fully charged. He only had another hour of air.

In the light from his torch, the creature remained hunched and silent. Curled up, it was about the size of a large footstool – big enough to put up a fight if he tried to move it from its pedestal by force.

He got to his feet and staggered over to press his gloved hand against the slab of rock blocking the entrance. His ankle felt a bit better now – not broken, merely bruised.

"Is this how you survived last time, shut away down here, all by yourself?"

He patted the rock. As a pilot, he was used to spending long periods of time cooped up in a cramped cockpit – but there was something about the sheer *weight* of this obstruction that scared him. Trapped in the dark with a dwindling air supply, beneath thousands of tonnes of solid bedrock, he felt the sweat break out around his collar. He needed to get out, back up to the surface, somewhere he could breathe freely without the helmet, see without the torch...

He thought of all the random jumps he'd made, and the other pilots he'd known. Where were they now? One by one, they'd jumped away, never to be seen or heard from again – probably having died lonely, desperate deaths in uncharted star systems.

That, he knew, was the price they paid for the excitement and fame, that was what was at stake every time he gambled his life on a random jump – the risk that something would go wrong, that he'd end up somewhere with no way back, stranded and alone.

Well, he thought, if that's the way it is, I'm not going down without a fight.

He turned back to the pedestal in the centre of the room.

"Let me out," he said. "I don't have enough air to stay down here."

The creature flinched. He walked over and gave it an experimental shove.

"I need to get back to my ship," he said.

He shoved again but couldn't dislodge it. All eight of its limbs were gripping the plinth.

He tried slapping and punching it, but it only curled tighter.

Eventually, he stepped back, breathing hard, feeling old. If he didn't have the strength to move it, he'd have to try something

else. He shone his torch around, but there was nothing he could use as a weapon.

"I'm getting too old for this," he muttered, and noticed again how the tentacles drew tighter at the sound of his voice.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Don't you like the noise?"

Grimly, he turned the volume on his suit's external speaker up as far as it would go, and put all his pain and frustration into one desperate shout of anger.

Startled, the creature released its grip on the pedestal and its tentacles whipped up to protect its body. Seeing his chance, Caesar grabbed hold and heaved.

Unbalanced, he fell backwards and it landed in his lap like a heavy, wriggling dog. For a moment, they sat there stunned. Then the rock door scraped back into its recess and a few swirls of dust blew into the room. Caesar felt the creature squirm, its skin turning a flabby white. He kicked it away with his good leg, and then crawled for the opening. As he did so, the creature rolled upright and slithered back to its pedestal, clearly desperate to re-seal the entrance.

"Oh no, you don't," Caesar said. He was almost at the door now, trying to ignore the pain in his bruised knees and ankle. With one last effort, he threw himself out of the room, into the narrow tunnel outside, and collapsed to the ground, panting.

Looking back, he caught a final glimpse of the creature lowering itself into position, then the heavy stone door crashed back into place, and all he could see was rock.

By the time Caesar pulled himself back up the sloping tunnel and staggered out onto the citadel's stone steps, the dust had stopped falling. Like ash, it lay over everything on the plateau – the collapsed towers, the ruined city, *The Red Shark*. He had maybe forty minutes of air left; his suit chafed and his ankle hurt.

He limped down the steps. Overhead, the sun was a swollen red blister in an indigo sky. Beneath his feet, the dust crunched like fresh snow.

Moving as quickly as he dared, he picked his way through it to his ship. When he got there, he was concerned to see more dust clinging to the hull, and no sign of life on board. Breathing hard, he leaned on one of the landing struts.

"Maya, are you there?"

He looked down; his boots and the lower legs of his suit were black, his gloves too. He'd have to strip his suit off if he wanted to stop the dust getting loose in his ship.

"Hello, Maya?"

He switched frequencies and tried again, but there was no response, nothing on the line but static.

He looked at the edge of the plateau, a few paces away. Could she have become disorientated in the dust storm and wandered off the edge? Was she lying down there injured and unconscious, waiting for him to find her?

He started to shuffle over, but stopped as a movement near the citadel caught his eye. A few metres from where he stood, individual particles of dust were gathering into a growing pile, bouncing and skittering together like iron filings under a magnet.

"Caesar, is that you?" The voice was faint, crackling through the static hiss in his headphones.

"Maya, where are you?"

In front of him, the dust had become a swaying column about a metre and a half high, its surface constantly shifting and churning.

"I'm right here."

He watched in horror as the column resolved into a crude human figure with a thin waist and strong shoulders.

"Don't be afraid," it said.

Details started to appear, first fingers, then eyes and hair, and a mouth.

"Maya, is that you?"

The figure regarded him with its black eyes. Its black lips parted.

"Yes," it said.

With every second that passed, the likeness became clearer, and more intolerable. Caesar took a step back, toward the ship. He said: "What happened to you?"

In the light of the bloated sun, the figure raised a hand to shade its eyes.

"Oh Caesar," it said, "if you could only see the things I've seen." It turned and looked back at the citadel. "All those octopus creatures, they're all in here with me, safe and sound."

Caesar took another step back, into the shadow of the ship's hull.

"In where?" he said. The oxygen dial in his helmet showed he had less than thirty minutes left.

"In the dust," Maya turned to face him. "They're all stored in the dust. That's how it works. It's a memory matrix. It breaks everything down, stores it as code. It preserves everything it touches."

Caesar took another step. He was at the cargo ramp now. All he needed to do to gain entry to the ship was lower it.

"But why?" he said. "Why do that?"

The figure of Maya turned her face up to the sun's red light and closed her eyes, as if enjoying its warmth. "They've all been saved," she said. "Just imagine it, Caesar. All those creatures, all their thoughts and dreams, they're all here. And when their sun dies, they won't have to die with it. The dust will blow outward on the solar wind, out into the universe, carrying a complete record of everything they once were."

She opened her eyes and took a step towards him, the dust rustling as she moved.

"It'll all be preserved," she said.

Caesar reached up to touch the ramp controls. "But where did it come from?" he asked. The creatures he'd seen in his dream hadn't possessed much in the way of technology; they'd been wriggling through an abandoned city, living in the ruins of another, vanished civilisation.

Maya let her bare black shoulders drop. "I don't know," she admitted. She took another step forwards, coming almost within reach.

"But what does it matter, Caesar?"

He pressed the control and the cargo ramp hinged down.

"It killed them all," he said, "it smothered them."

Maya shook her head. "They were going to die anyway. They were stuck here with a dying star. What else were they going to do?"

"That's not the point."

The figure of Maya folded its arms. "The dust saved me," she

said. "I couldn't see where I was going. I missed the ship and there was a cliff. I fell and shattered my faceplate. I was suffocating, Caesar, and the dust saved me."

Caesar took a deep breath. He placed a foot on the ramp.

"I'm leaving now," he said.

"No, you can't."

"Why? Are you going to stop me?" He waved his arm at the ruins of the fallen swamp city. "Are you going to kill me the way you killed all of them?"

Maya stumbled forward, palms turned pleadingly toward him. "No, you don't understand."

He stepped back, both feet on the ramp now, backing up into the ship.

"I'm not sure I want to," he said.

Once inside, he closed the ramp. He wriggled out of his suit in the cargo bay and made his way painfully up to the Star Chamber. His ankle hurt when he put his weight on it. His knees were sore. When he got there, he lowered himself into the pilot's chair. The walls were blank, the external cameras clogged with dust.

For a moment he sat listening to the breath wheezing in and out of his chest, then he flicked open a communications channel.

"I'm sorry," he said.

There was a crackle on the line, and Maya's voice came through, faint and distorted.

"Caesar, please don't do this," she said.

He looked down at his gnarled hands resting on the instrument panel, the reflection of his lined face in the glass between them. Now he was out of the suit, he could smell the sweat soaked into his shirt.

"You're not real," he said. "You're just a copy. The real Maya, the one I loved, is dead."

There was a noise on the line like wind blowing across a sandy beach, and then Maya said: "No, Caesar, you don't understand."

He touched a control and the engines whined into life, spinning up.

"Caesar, please."

The Red Shark rose into the air above the plateau.

"Goodbye, Maya."

He cut the channel. Some of the dust had shaken loose and the external cameras were clearer now. He was sure the fires of hyperspace would scour whatever remained from the hull.

He let the ship hang over the colossal wreck of the citadel for a moment, remembering his final glimpse of the octopoid creature alone in the underground crypt, the last surviving member of its race.

He rubbed his face with both hands. He said: "Nothing lasts."

Then he tipped the ship over until it stood on its tail in the harsh light of the dying sun, and threw the throttle wide open, leaping like an arrow into the empty sky.

This is Gareth Powell's third story in *Interzone*, after 'The Last Reef' (issue 202) and the Readers' Poll topping 'Ack-Ack Macaque' (issue 212). His collection *The Last Reef & Other Stories* is now available from Elastic Press, and he has recently completed a novel called *Silversands*. You can find out more at garethpowell.com.

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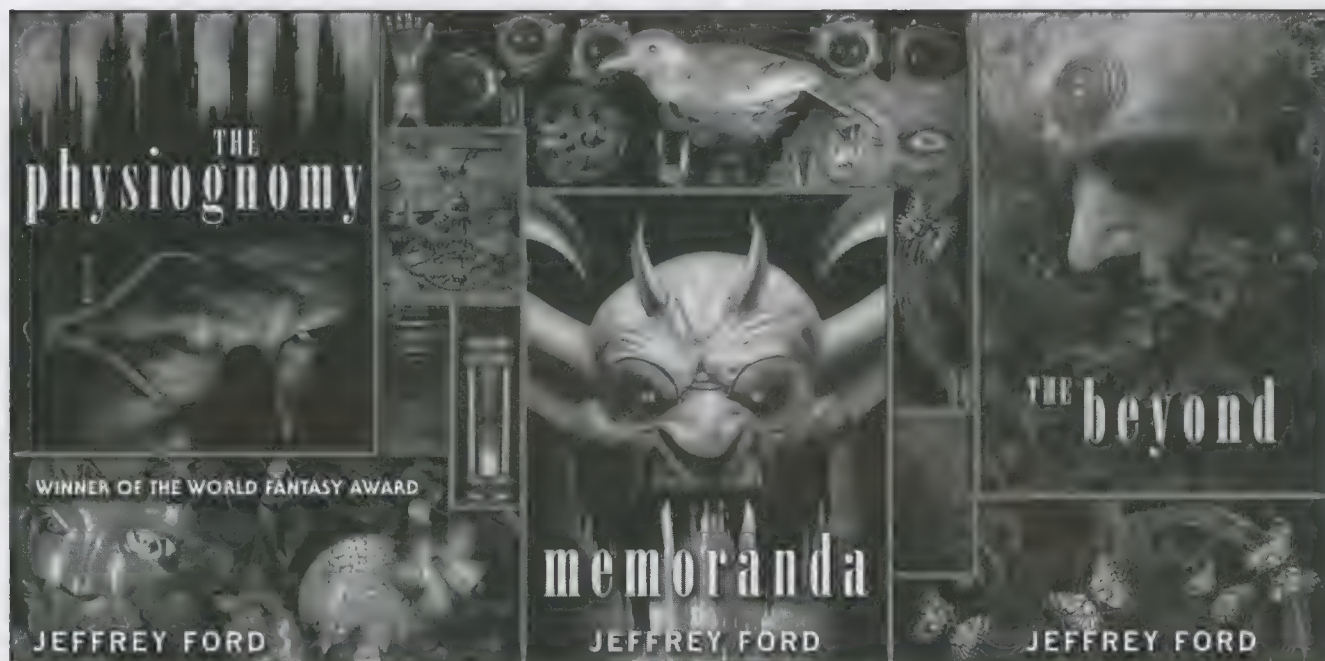
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Jeffrey Ford's Well-Built City

Commentary and Interview by Rick Kleffel

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Book Zone Book Reviews & Interviews

**THE PHYSIOGNOMY****Jeffrey Ford**

Golden Gryphon, 210pp, \$14.95 pb

It's always easier in retrospect, to see the whole picture. It's been just a little more than ten years since the publication of *The Well-Built City* trilogy by Jeffrey Ford, and having put the pieces together we begin to understand just what was taken apart in the first place. *The Physiognomy*, followed by *Memoranda* and *The Beyond*, appeared in varying formats that made their connection unclear. By the time *The Physiognomy* won the World Fantasy Award, it was mostly available as a peculiarly sized mass-market paperback with a cover so anonymous it could have been any kind of book. *Memoranda* came next as a trade paperback original, and shortly afterwards *The Beyond* as a hardcover original. By the time readers had all three to hand, most were looking at three different books in three different formats that weren't anything like what we expected. In fact, *The Well-Built City* trilogy was then – and is now – pretty much at a complete disconnect from the worlds of both genre and literary fiction. It's original and unique, qualities that will help it stand the test of time, and it needs to be presented carefully, so that readers can wrap their brains around the outstanding writing and conceptualisation.

To this end, we can thank Golden

MEMORANDA**Jeffrey Ford**

Golden Gryphon, 210pp, \$14.95 pb

Gryphon, who recently released the three novels in affordable trade paperbacks with cover art by John Picacio that helps make it clear just what we have with these books: not a trilogy so much as a triptych, an intricate creation that slots together in prose in much the same way the covers of the books fit together to form a larger image. Now we can put the pieces together.

The Well-Built City trilogy is not a standard starts-in-the-small-town-finishes-at-Mount-Gloom fantasy series, but it should still be read in order. In the first novel, *The Physiognomy*, we meet Cley, the Physiognomist, and it's a rude awakening. We are clearly not in our world, but we are just as clearly in a world where cruelty and injustice of the sort we get every day are dished out with vigour by Cley. The writing is sparse and witty, unusually direct for a work of genre fiction, and the perspective is skewed. It's a daring act of high-wire creativity, channelling anger and invention in equal parts.

Memoranda was not what we expected next. Instead of the further adventures, we got a new vision of Cley – of cruelty, of ourselves, and what it is possible for us to do in the name of what we believe to be true. Ford's sense of invention is unbound and freed from the mind of Cley, and he

THE BEYOND**Jeffrey Ford**

Golden Gryphon, 230pp, \$14.95 pb

manages to take us deeper into a mirror that explores the power of memory and self in an adventure that seethes with anger.

The final book in the series, *The Beyond*, takes us one step back from the original perspective. The story is told by Misrix, who imagines himself into Cley's world, because Misrix has been accused of killing Cley. Readers get more of the Kafkaesque prose and story line that made the previous two books so wonderful. Cley encounters daemons, flesh eating trees and other creatures that manage to be both symbolic and fully realised living beings. It's a really unique talent that Ford has, and he uses it well. The book's pace is fast, and it's filled with imaginative landscapes and visions.

At first, it was understandably difficult to put together the pieces of Ford's unique creation. There had never been anything remotely like it – and there still isn't, not really. But now, in these new editions, we can put together the big picture with an ease that was simply not possible before. Golden Gryphon and John Picacio slot in with Ford in the same way that Ford slots the books together. We're a puzzle; they're a solution. We may not like the picture we see, but the beauty of the assembly is undeniable.

Jeffrey Ford interviewed ►



« Working on a trilogy, at the time, was fun and seemed wonderfully complex, but I don't think I'd want to write more than one »

Describe the literary landscape extant when you began to conceive of and write *The Physiognomy*. What books – if any – were on your mind when you began to create the world of Physiognomist Cley?
We're going back more than a decade and a half for this, so things are somewhat vague. I got the idea for the books about five years or so before I wrote them. I'm not sure what the literary landscape was in general at that moment, but previously to that, when I was in graduate school, seriously working on fiction writing, the fantastic in literature was really business as usual. I'd studied with John Gardner, and he was certainly not averse to the influences of fantasy and science fiction, although, for some reason that was the rap on him. His works were highly imaginative – *Grendel*, *The King's Indian*, *In the Suicide Mountains*, etc. Also, the works that were big when

I'd had time to do a lot of reading, before we had kids, were all imbued with the fantastic to some degree – Calvino, Borges, Pynchon, Barth, Barthelme, Marquez, etc. I was interested in a kind of 'fabulation', but I wanted to get a less allegorical feel to it. I was trying to effect a darker, more descriptive fiction that grew organically around central ideas. I suppose I was leaning more toward what I liked about solidly genre science fiction and fantasy. I'd been writing both 'mainstream' stories for 'literary magazines' and 'straight up' genre stories for small press fantasy and horror magazines, always moving closer to the point where I'd eventually combine these two efforts. Once that blend came into my writing, I started to develop my own style. Mix all this liberally with my interest in Kafka and the Brothers Grimm, and the films of the Brothers Quay and

certain work by 'underground' comics artists like Kim Deitch, and out of that ball of confusion came *The Physiognomy*, *Memoranda* and *The Beyond*.

Could you talk about any non-fiction reading you did on memory, personality, or psychology that influenced *The Well-Built City* trilogy?

The thing that got me started thinking about the whole enterprise was my discovery of a two volume facsimile edition of the work of Johann Lavater, the great 18th century Physiognomist. I found one volume of this work covered with dust on an otherwise empty bottom shelf in the stacks of the Temple University library. I hunted down the other volume and then pored over them for a few hours. That day I had the basic idea for all three books by the time I left the library. I didn't start

writing the books for about another five years, but during that stretch I did more research on physiognomy by reading Stephen J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* and another facsimile edition of the Fowler Brothers work (19th century American Phrenologists) that I found in a garage sale. For the memory stuff in *Memoranda*, I'd read the works of Frances Yates – *The Art of Memory* and *Girodano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. Great books about memory palaces, ancient mnemonic techniques, and how memory and imagination enhance each other.

Did you write any sort of character or world notebooks before or during the writing of the books in *The Well-Built City* trilogy?

I don't generally do notes or notebooks but just start writing and go from there. I used to do more drawing, and I'd done some drawings of different scenes in the stories as they presented themselves to my imagination. And there was a story I wrote that was kind of a prototype piece of fiction that contained aspects of all the three novels called "The Delicate", which appeared in the magazine *Space and Time*.

The world of the *Well-Built City* is distinctly different from any that has come before or has come after. How did you go about creating the world in your own mind? And having done so, how difficult was it to have that world as perceived by Cley?

The fact that it was perceived by Cley made the job easier. There's something about a first person narrator in a strange world that allows the reader a sense of comfort of discovery and an easing into the fictional landscape. Cley took certain things for granted about his world, and I hoped the reader would as well. He spoke of things in the world of the *Well-Built City* as if they were part and parcel of the everyday even though to our world they seemed strange, and the reader could go along with him and feel in the know, like having a native guide you around a foreign city. I'm always able to drop into these first person characters and become them in my writing, and through their personas I make discoveries about their worlds I might not be able to if I were trying to encompass or create – as if brick laying – a world from the third person.

The prose in the books that comprise *The Well-Built City* trilogy has a particularly

scrubbed feel to it. Why did you choose this style?

I'm not sure I understand 'scrubbed' but I was trying to use a kind of faux 19th century voice and wanted it to embrace the scientific invention in the world that was more 20th century. I'd always loved Jules Verne, not so much for his writing style but for his vision, which to me in the 20th century seemed a conflation of the anachronistic and the futuristic. I guess this is what's at the heart of what's called Steampunk, a term I was unaware of at the time. My feeling is that the writing gets better as the books progress. The beginning fifty pages of *The Physiognomy* had been worked over so many times by me, I think it's a lot more tense than the rest of the trilogy. Maybe that's what you mean? As I loosened up and the story took me over, I think the writing got both looser and more concise, if that makes any sense. My florid excesses still got the better of me at times.

There's a level of casual cruelty in these novels that's still shocking. How and why did you go about creating this disturbing vision?

All I can say is that the character of Cley originally presented himself to me that way – as a real asshole. I was thinking of certain people in government, overcome by their own sense of importance and power. Some reviewers and readers wanted Cley to remain this way throughout the books, but for me that was too boring. No change in the protagonist, and you haven't got much of a story. The journey of the trilogy turned out to be about him growing as a person, coming to value other people and coming to understand his own humanity. None of this was planned out, but that's where he led me. Also, there's a very dark, sort of ironic, sense of humor that runs through the entire trilogy that I'm aware is there, was aware of in the writing, but can't explain it or say where it came from.

Did you know you were going to write a trilogy before you started the first book? If so, could you talk about creating the arc of the trilogy? If not, what spurred you to write the two sequels to *The Physiognomy*?

I conceived of it in three books because I wanted to show Cley's story from three different perspectives. Perspective and perception seemed to hook up for me when considering the idea of *Physiognomy*. Why three? I don't know, but I felt that two wouldn't have been enough to get the reading I wanted and four would have

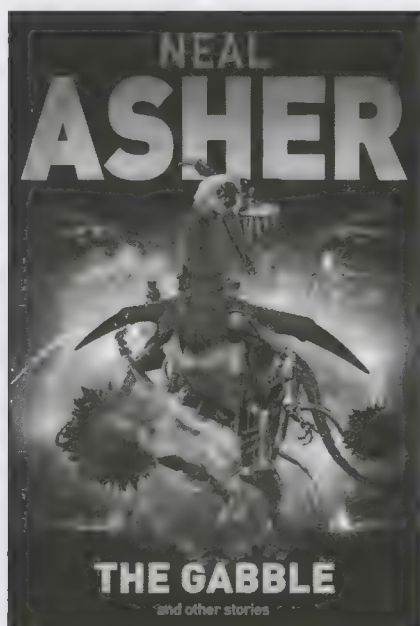
been ridiculous. There's something about 3. The first book is from Cley's perspective, the second has Cley immersed in the perspective of the other, and the third shows Cley in third person, at a bit of a distance, lost in the Beyond. There are a lot of threads that weave these books together, but I think you could probably read them as separate novels as well. Working on a trilogy, at the time, was fun and seemed wonderfully complex, but I don't think I'd want to write more than one. There are other kinds of storytelling structures that interest me now.

The *Well-Built City* trilogy seems far more timeless than most fantasy and, indeed, most literary fiction. Can you comment on any intentional techniques you employed to scrub this work of references that would date it?

I don't remember anything intentional, but the story presented itself to me so vividly that the world of it seemed pretty real. I saw it clearly. The story was looking out for itself in that regard. I think partially that 'timelessness' you mention comes out of my interest at the time in 'fabulation'. That's an interesting aspect of that type of fiction. In the classical form the Fable also has a definite message to convey, though. I always found that aspect of the form a drag. I wanted to separate out the sense of timelessness and leave the necessity of a definitive message behind.

Looking back at these books now, could you talk about the new edition from *Golden Gryphon* and how having them published in a consistent format might change the reading experience for new readers?

I can't say enough what it means to have John Picacio do the covers for these. I think that alone enhances the trilogy. Each cover is a third of a large triptych he made in a box with paintings and objects he'd found. It's an incredible work of art, in and of itself, and I think the covers are spectacular. If you line them up, you can see the entire triptych complete. It was the publisher's, Gary Turner's, idea to do them in trade paperback, which I think was the way to go. They look great, and they're not too expensive. The consistent format is welcome to my mind because it lets people know that they are in some way connected. The old covers and formats didn't hint at a relationship between the books at all. I'm hoping more readers discover them and make it to the end of the journey. ■



THE GABBLE AND OTHER STORIES

Neal Asher

Tor, 339pp, £17.99 hb

Reviewed by Tony Lee

By his own admission, Neal Asher writes 'Schwarzenegger SF', and many core themes of Runcible tales and the Cormac sequence in Asher's on-going series of Polity novels hark back to the nostalgia of pulp-era adventure, especially space opera by influential genre-giant A.E. van Vogt. In a milieu where interstellar treks are simplified by teleportation gateways, it's not unusual that Asher's first collection (from a major publisher) would spotlight expeditions – to various strange planets inhabited by even stranger creatures – related by viewpoint characters like admin monitors and security agents, scientific researchers, investigative journalists and outlaws.

This collection of vaguely or explicitly linked short fiction offers plenty of opportunities for homicidal feats with spectacular gore due to the widespread deployment of android golems, super-cyborgs, rail-guns/pulse-rifle shootouts, and exciting conflicts involving Asher's always-inventive brand of monsters. While uncovering the secrets of extinct races, perhaps hoping to benefit from others' failures by decoding useful survival traits in the coldly indifferent universe, seeking acclaim for expanding human knowledge, or just making a living as scavengers and traders, at least some of Asher's competent heroes and ambitious villains learn things about themselves as well. Expedient

backstory elements remain generally anti-corporate, and few stories here suggest any strongly imaginative, science fictional answers to political, diplomatic or acute social problems beyond the obvious extralegal remedies with an optimistic reliance on conventional morality.

Part climbing, part hunting story 'Softly Spoke The Gabbleduck' is the first of three dramas concerning a bizarre creature that first appeared in Asher's novel *The Line of Polity*. In 'Putrefactors', systematic abuse of human colonists with symbionts results in a generation of slave labourers under a brutal regime. AI intervention breaks a planetary tyrant's covert oppression, with rough/poetic justice ending corrupt decadence, in 'Garp and Geronamid'. Visiting ice planet Orbus, a documentarist witnesses the resurrection of a frozen race in 'The Sea of Death'. 'Alien Archaeology' explores unfriendly rivalries between profiteers Rho and Jael, both after the rewards of dealing in Atheter tech, and its unique application to a captive gabbleduck specimen.

There's a further awakening of dormant alien tech in 'Acephalous Dreams', when the node of a hive-mind implant forces unexpected changes upon a freed convict, in an experiment so dangerous that cautious overseer Geronamid only dares unleash its intriguing potential on an uninhabited world. Although most of Asher's work is roundly cynical in tone, 'Snow in the Desert' is darkly romanticised tragedy with an immortal albino hunted by mercenaries after DNA samples. 'Choudapt' starts with viral infection in *Body Snatchers*' zombification mode, tackled by heroic agent Simoz, host for a doctor mycelia, confronting overwhelming odds, together. 'Adaptogenic' sees genetic transformation as the key to human survival for a treasure hunter/tomb raider caught in a tidal flood. Plenty of enticing details on gabbleduck origins are revealed by a hastily organised scientific mission for an unlikely team-up in 'The Gabble', the open-ended (Asher promises more about gabbleducks in a future book) final story here, which also features an encounter with the Dragon-spawned dracomen.

Vividly described combat scenes are a given. Yet Asher's greatest authorial strengths also include a keen sense of 'otherness', albeit one locked into braving the knife-sharp contrasts between honesty and injustice, troubled with boldly perceptive or surrealistic estrangements from wholly comforting normality, that's close as a heartbeat or distant as the farthest star.



AGENT TO THE STARS

John Scalzi

Tor, 352pp, \$14.95 pb

Reviewed by Juliet McKenna

Fans of Scalzi's 'Old Man's War' books will naturally pick this up in a bookshop. Reading the foreword, they may consider putting it back. Written in 1997, Scalzi had a modest success web-publishing this story but it still looks like a 'trunk novel', those apprentice pieces every writer stores away. Later success frequently sees publishers rush these into print. Too often, the original reasons for rejection remain valid.

Hopefully, the equivocating reader will turn to the first page of the story. This swiftly reassures me the talent I've admired in the 'Old Man's War' books is at work. The prose is clean and direct, the pace swift and involving. There's that instinct for telling, quirky detail and a confiding, engaging first-person voice.

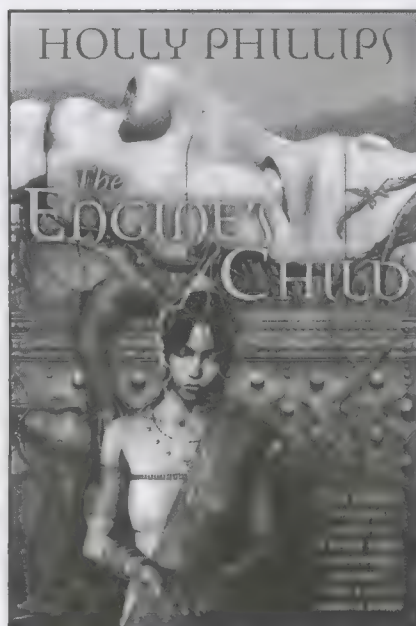
What's not immediately obvious is this is SF. We meet Thomas Stein, a mid-level Hollywood agent, representing actors from no-hopers through has-beens and divas to rising talents like Michelle Beck. He's currently securing her \$14 million for a post-apocalypse action flick, aided by his invaluable, astute PA, Miranda. Michelle isn't entirely pleased. Her heart's set on playing a fortyish survivor of the Warsaw ghetto and concentration camps who becomes an American civil rights activist. Tom must convince her that's a step too far for a 25-year-old Californian blonde who thinks Treblinka is a shop on Melrose.

When the action-flick deal is done, Tom is summoned to see Carl Lupo, agency head and major Hollywood player. Understandably, Carl wants to discuss science fiction. As the conversation turns to the way aliens making first contact are so often hostile, Tom's happy to go with the flow. Evil aliens make better films. Good aliens means *Batteries Not Included*. But no, Carl isn't involved in some new studio SF project. He wants Tom to farm out his lesser actors, to commit himself to a secret client with major image issues needing delicate handling. Tom's instinct is to say no and go get drunk as his career implodes. Naturally, he says yes.

Unsurprisingly, the new client is an alien. The Yherajk, two thousand gelatinous beings, recently arrived in a hollow-asteroid spaceship. They've been observing our earth through film and TV and noted that bias towards aliens. They need a more subtle strategy than landing on the White House lawn. Not least, as Joshua, their representative accepts, because they look like snot and smell like dead fish. Can Tom possibly convince the public these new arrivals are friendly? When he's horribly disconcerted to learn they can exude tendrils fine enough to penetrate a human's brain, and their definition of selfhood is as alien as their appearance?

I won't give away the ending, though it won't surprise you. What will keep you guessing is Tom's journey. You'll be wrong-footed more than once. When you think you've understood one of the characters, from airhead Michelle Beck to sleazy tabloid journalist Jim Van Doren, and Carl Lupo himself, you'll learn something that demands you rethink your opinions. The sub-plot woven around that holocaust survivor film reinforces the subtext; that making assumptions, especially about those perceived as 'other' is foolhardy at best, disastrous at worst. Thus, while this is a very funny, essentially light-hearted novel, it remains true to the best traditions of serious speculative fiction. Not least that success must come at a cost. Be prepared for some real lump in the throat moments amid the chuckles.

I've no idea why this wasn't conventionally published in 1997. Whatever. The time is right for it now. *Entourage*, *Studio 60* and *30 Rock* have made the backstage world of film and TV familiar. In-jokes will also delight true fans. Most welcome, in these dismal days, it's a feel-good book. Buy a copy for yourself and another to give as a gift.



THE ENGINE'S CHILD

Holly Phillips

Del Rey, 400pp, \$15 pb

Reviewed by Mike Copley

How specific can you be when writing something for others to read? Prose narrative offers a huge range of technique from the lyrically allusory to the driest functional style. Now, across that spectrum you can choose a degree of specificity about how you treat any particular aspect of your prose – inner character, outer character interaction, description, plot linearity, dramatic turning points, milieu, etc. Of course, I say 'choose' in the full knowledge that many (most?) writers write instinctively and many things are written that aren't what you would call chosen.

Holly Phillips comes across as a strongly instinctual writer, with an intense, highly lyrical grasp of the language, sometimes with a lateral, emotional element that reminds me quite strongly of Samuel Delany. In *The Engine's Child* her main character is Moth, a young woman who is a novice at the scholarium, part of the Bastion which, along with the Bay, make up the Shadras. The Shadras is the densely-populated city on the only island on the world of the book, while the farmlands of the island are called the Hadaras. The milieu of the book has a strong Indian/Thai flavour, and the depicted society are the descendants of those who came to this world after fleeing their home world, which had been ruined by some widespread catastrophe. To various parts and places

of this society Phillips assigns a variety of names and implied connotations that seem opaque as many go unclarified. There is a glossary at the back, but it feels too short and lacking in explanation.

Which seems odd to me. There is a point near the start, on page 16, where Phillips gives a sketchy summary of the city's layout and its relationship with the countryside; at this point clarity and scale would help a reader to grasp the boundaries of this strange place but instead it comes across as vague and undefined. Sure, I realise that for some readers this isn't a problem, but it is for me. Just saying.

A similar vagueness arises during scenes of fast-paced drama and violent clashes. At the end of the first chapter, Moth encounters a manifest, literally a mechanical-seeming manifestation of the mysterious gods of the ocean world. But Phillips doesn't describe it, she alludes to it, almost impressionistically, so that we're left with the feeling that Moth has seen something crucial but we haven't. Same in the next chapter when Moth goes down the Tidal, a wide slum spread along the shore before the city, to where a secret gathering of the Mundabi (a select group who worship the gods of the ocean world) have met in a chamber containing the Engine. The Engine also seems to be a manifestation of these old gods and so this scene is our first sight of it, but again rather than description we get vague impressions.

Yet the details of inner and outer character are carefully and poetically delineated, with the nuances of emotion explored, motives picked over, dialogue freighted with clear meaning. Now, I know that some writers feel that their readers don't need to be handheld through the narrative, and that there should be considerable latitude allowed for readers to employ their own interpretation. Also, there are other writers who work hard to try and obscure the meaning and the answers from themselves out of fear that the story may come out as too obvious to be worthwhile. I don't know if Holly Phillips would fall into either of these categories, but that's no bad thing. She is a very lyrical writer, sometimes to the point of flying off on updrafts of intense imagery, and many readers find this kind of prose highly enjoyable. I've certainly found *The Engine's Child* to be an unclinked, highly individualistic work executed with a flair and love of the language that makes for a memorable read. It just doesn't quite satisfy the clarity junky in me!



© Patrick Imbert

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST has been writing fiction for more than 40 years. Best known as the author of *The Prestige*, he has built a wide and fervent audience for his complex and unsettling explorations of illusion, memory and deception. **ANDY HEDGECOCK** selects some high points in Priest's career and reviews three new publications from GrimGrin Studio (christopher-priest.co.uk).

I have a shelf of 'one-handed reading material'. I'm not confessing to a predilection for Nexus paperbacks: this is the stuff I read in the early 1980s, straphanging my way from Uxbridge to Amersham amid a salmon pink forest of carefully folded copies of the *Financial Times*. The book I remember most vividly in its Metropolitan Line context is Christopher Priest's *The Affirmation*.

There's a moment early in *The Affirmation* so utterly jaw dropping I can remember exactly where I read it first (rattling into Moor Park station). I won't spoil the effect for those who haven't encountered this strange and rewarding book, but it involves a massive shift in the reader's frame of reference and beliefs about the narrator. It's a delicately executed but momentous perceptual shift that only the most accomplished writers can pull off.

The Affirmation (1981) concerns a man failing to cope with unemployment, bereavement and the cataclysmic collapse of a relationship. He retreats to a remote cottage to make sense of his life by writing an autobiography. After renaming people and places – to kick over the real-life traces of his story – he becomes disenchanted with the memoir and begins to create a fantasy location, the Dream Archipelago, taking his narrator (himself) on a sea voyage to an island where memory is traded for the secret of immortality.

In its handling of psychological disintegration *The Affirmation* merits comparison with Poe at his best, and it scales empyrean heights in its adroit analysis of the boundaries of identity, the

truthfulness of memory and the complex interrelationship of narrative and reality.

In the gap between *The Affirmation* and Priest's next full length novel, I was able to catch up with his back catalogue. *Indoctrinaire* (1970) – a tale of post-war ecological disaster and psychoactive pollutants – is written with the sharp focus strangeness that was to become the author's signature, but offers no hint of the thematic development of his later work.

The controversial *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972) was inspired by a question on the cover of *New Worlds*, 'What is the exact nature of the catastrophe?' Ominous and tragic, it concerns the arrival in Britain of vast numbers of African refugees. Priest's unflinchingly forensic reflection on race and asylum came when extreme nationalist organisations had a real foothold in British politics and redtop newspapers encouraged racist panic over the arrival of expelled Ugandan Asians. Some liberal reviewers saw the book as an insightful and humane reflection on fear and its impact on human behaviour; others dismissed it as a racist allegory. Priest's intention was to highlight the *real* nature of the catastrophe – brutality as a response to calamity. It is a powerful analysis of the fragile nature of compassion and civilisation, but the resurgence of the far right in Britain and the crass discussion of race in the tabloids mean this discomfiting book still provokes ambivalent reactions.

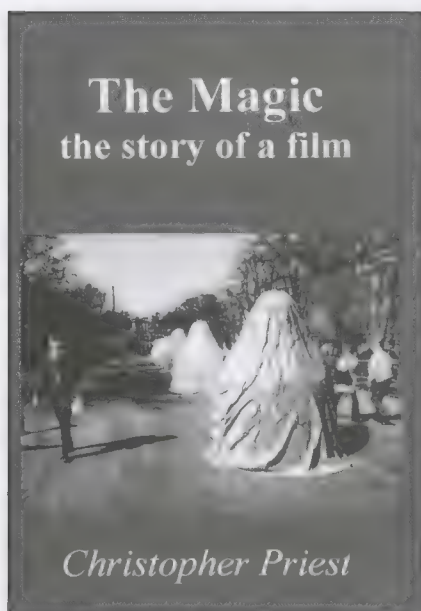
Inverted World (1974) is Priest's most 'traditional' sf novel but its themes prefigure those of his later slipstream novels. The central motif is a city which lays and disassembles track as it travels

across a despoiled landscape, but its focus is the provisional nature of reality.

With *A Dream of Wessex* (1977) Priest returned to his recurring theme of perception as construction: it is 1983 and Britain is a dystopia destabilised by terrorism, social disintegration and economic collapse. If that makes the book sound like a prophecy of the 'real' 1983, there are more baroque elements to the setting – for example, an Islamic America and a Wessex separated from the mainland by man-made geological catastrophe and a collective dreaming project (virtual reality avant la lettre) designed to generate solutions to the socio-economic ills of the 'real' Britain. This was Priest's breakthrough book – an intricately inventive thought experiment and a powerful social satire.

Critical expectations of *The Glamour* (1984) were huge because Priest had been named one of the 'Best of Young British Novelists of 1983' along with Amis, Rushdie and Tremain: he was the only writer on the list to be marketed as a genre author. He ploughed familiar furrows to great effect: *The Glamour* blends the stock sf motif of invisibility with a dash of psychological horror and creates a haunting metafiction about memory and enchantment. Priest also scripted an interesting Radio 4 adaptation of the book.

The Prestige, winner of the 1995 World Fantasy Award and Priest's best known novel, is a multi-layered tale of competing 19th Century illusionists and their historical legacy. It is a magical cabinet of epistolary and diary forms, fragmented perspectives, spectacular deception and metaphysical



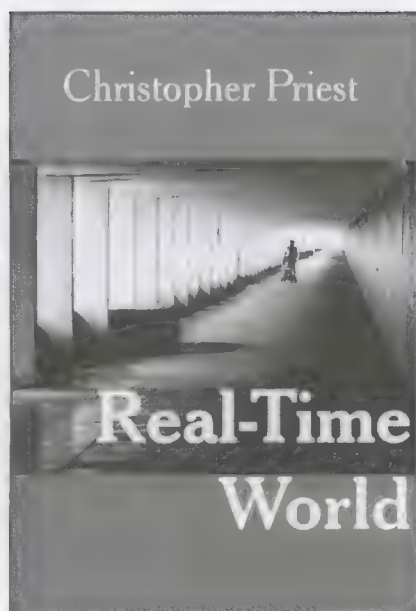
speculation. Form is perfectly in concert with subject matter, as Priest explores profound issues of identity, reality and artifice.

The Extremes (1998) examines the impulses underlying spree killings. A harrowing and provocative reflection on the insidious lure of violence, it also reflects on the impact of internet technologies and virtual reality on the human psyche and the way we make and interpret our world.

Priest's most recent novel, *The Separation* (2002), is an alternate history of World War II concerning twin brothers – a conscientious objector and bomber captain respectively. He exhibits a continuing fascination with doubles and the fluidity of identity, as well as a forensic eye for complex issues of morality. And he takes perceptual relativity to a whole new level, pulling the rug from under the notions of history and belief.

Other significant works in Priest's oeuvre include *The Space Machine* (1976), a passionate pastiche of the sf novels of H.G. Wells; *An Infinite Summer* (1979), a collection of stories set on the Dream Archipelago that later provided a setting for one strand of *The Affirmation*; and *The Quiet Woman* (1990) a satirical tale of the Thatcher years, in which a hard rain of radioactive debris falls on the UK.

The Magic: The Story of a Film (150pp, £16.99 hb) is essentially a memoir of Christopher Priest's sometimes remote but always engaged involvement in the creation of the film version of his best known novel, *The Prestige*. Each chapter has a title that echoes the presentation of the film's illusions (the pledge, the turn, the prestige)



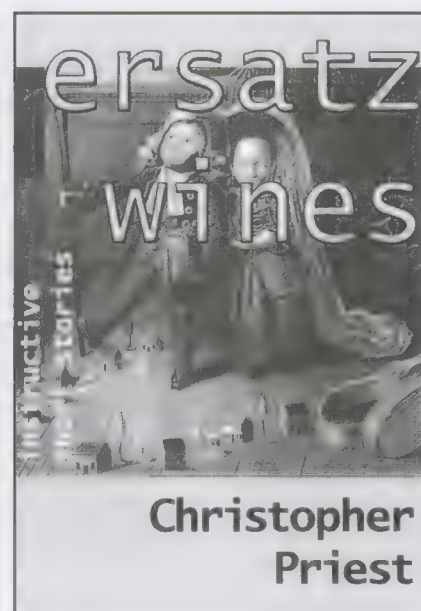
in a series of developmental stages – The Thought, The Writing, The Adaptation etc.

It begins with frank and fascinating insight into the development of the central idea, from an initial half-hearted interest in a TV illusionist, through cross-cultural research to an interest in the obsessive compulsive behaviour that underpins the great acts of stage magic.

It is fascinating to learn, given his dogged pursuit of his literary obsessions – identity, deception, memory and the plasticity of reality – that the trigger for the story came from Priest's discovery of a psychological fixation that came to dominate an illusionist's life. But it is even more fascinating to learn that it took another 15 years for Priest to commit to writing the novel, and that an idea that began with an image on TV begat a book built around a simple image of a magician writing his memoirs.

Unlike his competing illusionists, Priest is more than happy to reveal how the trick is done. He reveals his methods of composition – he writes second drafts, eschewing IT-based shortcuts – and talks about his despair as the story began to seem lightweight. He's even happy to acknowledge the financial imperative that prevented him from abandoning the novel altogether. If Priest's honesty is one of the elements making *The Magic* a genuinely worthwhile read, the other is his integrity: he may write for a living, but his work is based on a quest for seriousness – in the sense of relevance to his readers and their world.

And that quest informed his reaction to the process through which the Nolan brothers created the film version of *The Prestige*.



Priest's reaction to the filmmakers' efforts is rigorous but generous: in the chapter titled *The Adaptation*, he highlights key differences between novel and film – praising the film's deft opening sequence and its juggling of seven levels of plotting. The Nolans' adaptation, he feels, was brilliant because they went for a 'purely filmic' approach rather than merely filming a novel.

For a brief book *The Magic* is comparatively expensive, but it's essential reading for committed admirers of Priest's work, anyone needing an insight into the way the creative imagination works or anyone interested in the fragile ecology of the relationship between book and film.

Real-Time World (170pp, £16.99 hb) is a new edition of Priest's first story collection, originally published in 1974 and containing his first published story 'The Run' (which appeared in *Impulse* in 1966). In Priest's 2008 introduction he acknowledges his influences, highlights ways in which early stories prefigure later ones and confesses his feeling that this first collection came too soon in his career to yield the strongest possible collection of stories, but Priest is his own most rigorous critic.

The clarity and precision of the prose in his later novels and stories is reflected in all ten of the pieces here; all of them offer something in the way of provocation and engagement and four of them are vivid and unsettling enough to burn their way into your memory forever.

'The Head and the Hand', concerning a man who has made a fortune by literally taking himself apart in public was first published in 1972, but provides a perfect,

if elliptical, comment on the voracious consumption of reality TV in 2008.

'Real Time World', which concerns an experiment in filtering news and information about 'big picture' events in the world, adumbrates his developing obsession with the psychological impact of environmental stressors.

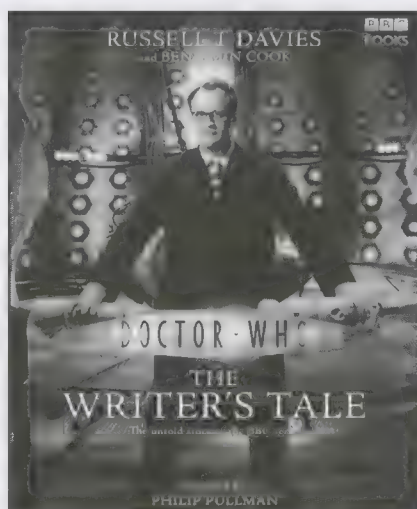
'A Woman Naked' is a powerful tale concerning individual survival in an authoritarian and hypocritical society and the complex relationship between observer and observed: its central motif (as indicated by the title) could, if handled by a less precise and insightful writer, have been interpreted as 'one-handed reading material' in the traditional sense.

In his new introduction Priest suggests the story 'Transplant', with its nested imaginary worlds, shares thematic concerns with later novels such as *A Dream of Wessex* and *The Affirmation*. It is a powerful, multi-faceted and impressively condensed tale, cramming reflections on several of Priest's obsessions (moral, metaphysical and perceptual) into 16 pages.

Ersatz Wines (170pp, £16.99 hb) gathers twelve stories never before collected in book form, nine of which are published for the first time anywhere. The collection is necessarily uneven – it consists of work produced when Priest was in his early twenties, most of it rejected or never submitted. They have not been rewritten in any way. Written between 1963 and 1968, their presentation in chronological order highlights the extent to which Priest's work developed over the five year period – the striving for effect of the earliest is replaced by a more assured voice and higher level of control in the later stories.

In his fascinating 34-page introduction (a touching, honest and insightful chronicle of Priest's early life and career) the author asserts that none of the stories is embarrassingly awful but they are best read as object lessons in creative writing. I can't argue with either of those sentiments: the Introduction, Afterword and detailed notes at the end of each piece (including feedback from the likes of Michael Moorcock) are at least as important and entertaining as the stories themselves – which is entirely appropriate to a collection designed to "encourage others, who might have now the same objective as [Priest] did then."

Ersatz Wines gives you what it says on the tin – and I'd have no hesitation recommending it to anyone with the ambition of writing fiction or criticism for paying markets.



DOCTOR WHO: THE WRITER'S TALE Russell T. Davies & Benjamin Cook

BBC Books, 512pp, £30 hb

THE TORCHWOOD ARCHIVES Gary Russell

BBC Books, 158pp, £14.99 hb

DOCTOR WHO: SHINING DARKNESS Mark Michalowski

BBC Books, 256pp, £6.99 hb

DOCTOR WHO: THE DOCTOR TRAP Simon Messingham

BBC Books, 256pp, £6.99 hb

DOCTOR WHO: GHOSTS OF INDIA Mark Morris

BBC Books, 256pp, £6.99 hb

TORCHWOOD: PACK ANIMALS Peter Anghelides

BBC Books, 256pp, £6.99 hb

TORCHWOOD: SKYPOINT Phil Ford

BBC Books, 256pp, £6.99 hb

TORCHWOOD: ALMOST PERFECT James Goss

BBC Books, 256pp, £6.99 hb

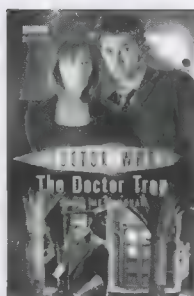
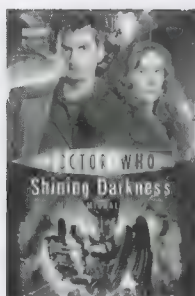
It's difficult to imagine any other British television series that has been quite so thoroughly researched and documented as *Doctor Who*. From the publication of *The Making of Doctor Who* in 1972 to the most recent episode of BBC Three's *Doctor Who Confidential*, an ever more knowledgeable and demanding audience has sought out every detail of the show's production. Magazine and book publishers have been able to satisfy this craving thanks to both the scale of the prospective readership and the fact that some fans are willing to spend years tracking down all those lost memos and department reports from the obsidian depths of the BBC's administrative archives.

Of course, relatively little 'behind the scenes' coverage is written by those directly involved in the show's production; and when it has, enough time has usually passed to smooth at least some of the sharper memories. Not so **Doctor Who: The Writer's Tale**. By collecting together a year's worth of emailed correspondence between Russell T. Davies (head writer and executive producer) and journalist Benjamin Cooke (who has been 'embedded' into the production for several years and is therefore as close as you can get to *Doctor Who* without being on the BBC's payroll) this book is probably the nearest we'll get to a day-by-day diary of 'How it happened, as it happened'.

Cooke's initial interest was in exploring 'the nuts and bolts' of writing a *Doctor Who* script, and the book is infused with Davies's view on the subject: from practical suggestions on how to emphasise the pace of a scene in the way you format the stage directions, to the honing of dialogue. Plus, of course, that vitally important lesson that every writer ultimately has to find their own way of writing.

Which is just as well. Unlike his contemporary Paul Abbott, who writes a first draft and then focuses on what the story is about – deciding what works and what doesn't before starting a second draft – Davies's approach is more intuitive. "I don't often do treatments or breakdowns," he warns Cooke at the start. "There's little physical evidence of the script process to show you. No notes. Nothing. I think, and think and think...and by the time I come to write, a lot has been decided." That approach certainly seems to fit with Davies's public persona, of the big man who exudes self-confidence from every pore.

The surprise of this book is the picture



DOCTOR WHO has been in existence now for longer than most people can remember and it is currently bigger than it has ever been. Its commercial appeal and critical respect may have ebbed and flowed with the passing decades, but throughout its lifetime secondary sources have remained popular with a loyal public. Today, besides the two spin-off television series, there are a great number of other choices available for the adventurer, and **PAUL F. COCKBURN** keeps track of some of the latest in print.

of Davies as a man so paralysed by the fear of not writing anything good that he will procrastinate for weeks about even starting a script. "That's where this job is knacker and debilitating," he writes. "Everything – and I mean every story written anywhere – is underscored by the constant murmur of: this is rubbish, I am rubbish, and this is due in on Tuesday!" Which may well explain why most of Davies's longest emails are written in the darkest hours just before dawn.

The irony is that once he starts writing, all his anticipated problems magically sort themselves out; yet he's unable to learn from this. "I can only conclude that I've lumbered myself with a painful system that works," he explains during one particular long dark email of the soul. "Is it like a superstition that I have to panic in order to write well? It drives me mad." No wonder his *Doctor Who* successor Steven Moffat said: "If you still want to be a writer after reading this, then you probably will be."

On occasions during *The Writer's Tale*, Davies has cause to mention the supposedly 'more grown up' *Doctor Who* spinoff *Torchwood*. Regardless of its intended audience, BBC Books seem to believe this show's audience isn't yet ready for anything approaching the sophistication and detail of *The Writer's*

Tale. In contrast, **The Torchwood Archives** – written by BBC Wales script editor Gary Russell – is an overview of the fictional events shown over the first two series, presented in the style of a suppressed 'exposé'. While well done in terms of design and production, you can't quite help wonder what the point of it all is – assuming you can suspend your disbelief at the thought of Captain Jack Harkness spending his evenings writing up weekly reports of Rift activity.

These days, BBC Books are an imprint of Ebury Publishing, itself a division of the Random House Group. Current sales figures alone suggest that the editorial teams controlling their *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* novels are well versed in the art of such applied fiction, although the real challenge with at least the latter series must surely be trying to match the tone of a show that veers between wannabe bloody urban thriller and *Scooby Doo* minus the jokes and the disgruntled janitor. No wonder, with the novel *Skypoint*, they even opt for a writer who's scripted a few episodes of the TV show, although by keeping most of the action in a luxury block of flats Phil Ford does little that couldn't have been easily reproduced on screen.

The *Doctor Who* novels, in contrast, do

at least feature interplanetary chases and recreations of 1947 India that would be difficult to fit into the budget of a televised 45 minute episode, playing to the financial advantage of the written word. Beyond that, though, all six books pretty well represent the three defining characteristics of the modern spin-off novel. Firstly, there's the vital necessity of the authors to successfully replicate, on paper, characters usually brought to life on television by actors. Secondly, there's the lightness of touch that comes from being able to assume that most readers will bring to the books a wealth of knowledge about these particular fictional worlds. And thirdly? At least when it comes to the main characters, there's the requirement that they remain essentially the same at the end as they were at the start – but as that could also be said for most of the TV episodes, is that really a complaint? Readers come to these books expecting 'more of the same, but different', which is why their writers must remember that, playing with somebody else's toys, it's only polite to make sure they return them in the same state they found them.

Latest *Doctor Who* novels also received: **Beautiful Chaos** by Gary Russell, **The Story of Martha** by Dan Abnett and **The Eyeless** by Lance Parkin. All BBC Books, £6.99 hb, published 26 December.



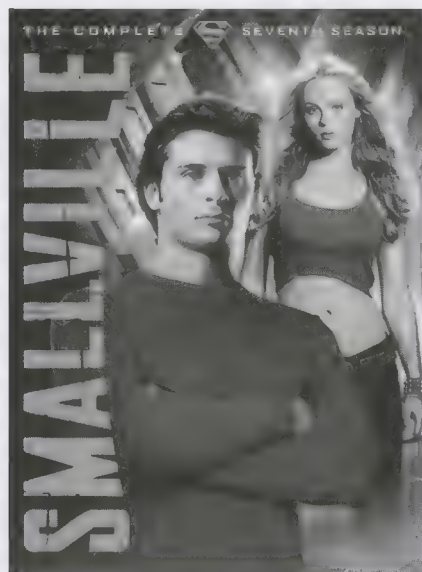
Transmissions From Beyond is the biweekly podcast of stories selected from the pages of the TTA Press magazines *Interzone* (science fiction & fantasy), *Black Static* (horror) and *Crimewave* (crime & mystery) by editor Pete Bullock. New stories appear every other Monday.

So far we've broadcast stories by Greg Egan, Dominic Green, Rachel Swirsky, Gareth L. Powell, Scott Nicholson, O'Neil De Noux, Marion Arnott, Mercurio D. Rivera, Tim Akers and many more.

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FREE!

Laser Fodder Tony Lee



The seventh season of **Smallville** (13 October) makes little progress on recent story-arcs. Blatant avoidance of Clark Kent's 'destiny' has made this 'Superboy' a TV farce. His foster-dad's gone and even his mum's left home, so why is Clark still on the farm? Yes, it's fun to watch Clark's weighty moral struggles, and new frustrations caused by the arrival of rebellious Kara/Supergirl (Laura Vandervoort, of Canadian rock 'n' roll drama *Instant Star*), and the wholly disruptive antics of Clark's evil-twin Bizarro add some doppelgänger intrigue to a couple of episodes, but *Smallville* has abandoned its once-promising attempts to deconstruct and revitalise the origin story of the world's most famous superhero. For the last three seasons, the show's writers and producers have messed with krypto-mythos timelines in their on-going modernisation effort to counteract familiar *Superman* comics' lore, movie versions, and previous telly series. Its introspective narrative functions as an obvious case of arrested development. But, interestingly, *Smallville*'s unsophisticated subgenre adventure has become a doubly-ironic reflection of a profoundly blinkered nation stuck in a hobbyist past that's never existed. Like his adopted homeland, Superman's general concerns ought to be global in scope/reach but, morally anxious and intellectually immature, perpetually vexed Kal (from dead planet Krypton's house of El) is bothered only with childish things he should have put away – clinging desperately to teenage friendships over-extended in soap opera fashion, and

longing for a resumption of dour normality whatever crisis is faced or disaster narrowly averted. Has the Man of Steel no ambitions beyond ranch-homestead caretaker? It's possible that the USA has just elected their first 'grown-up' president for a generation. Might he be forward-thinking with plenty of grand plans? Will he be out-going upon the international stage? (Is there any chance for a manned flight to Mars in the near future? At least, while our planet still has sufficient natural and economic resources needed for establishing a permanent colony there?) Though essentially whimsical entertainment, telefantasy like *Smallville* has a notable history of reflecting on the socio-political trends of its time. To succeed as competent drama, however, genre TV should also explore wider aspirations. (Something that *The Sarah Connor*

Chronicles manages well enough without sacrificing its popular appeal.) As he appears now, Clark seems almost retarded (especially by Kryptonian standards!), both emotionally and expressively. If there's to be any future prospects for *Smallville* (and perhaps for America in the long-term?), intelligent and influential leadership is required, but it's obvious judging from the evidence presented that Clark (and recent US presidents too?) lacks confidence for such a role. Tongue-in-cheek comparisons between Clark's choosing provincial Smallville mentality over the greater possibilities suggested by the lure of Metropolis, and the boringly static American political scenery aside, the failure of this series to develop (beyond its initial premise) means it needs a swift kick up the backside just to maintain, let alone improve, its appeal to superhero fans.



French writer-producer-director Mathieu Kassovitz has proved that he's capable of generating unsettling drama (see *La Haine*, 1995), and pulling together cross-genre conflicts, or contradictory filmic elements, in *The Crimson Rivers* (aka: *Les Rivières pourpres*, 2000), but has maintained a spotty track record with duds like *Gothika* (2003), obviously ruined by useless 'star' Halle Berry but also wasting the talents of Penélope Cruz and Robert Downey Jr.

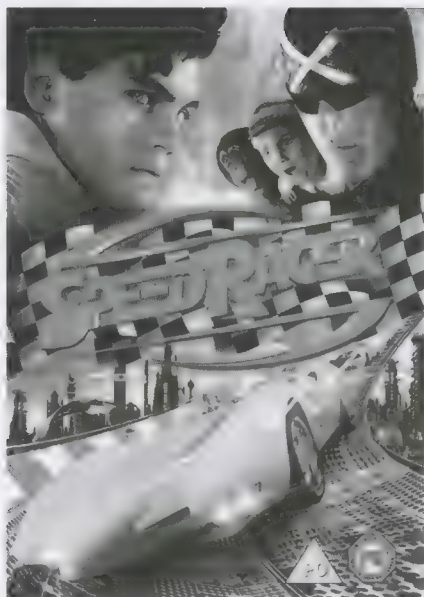
On first hearing of Kassovitz's **Babylon A.D.** (29 December), I thought it sounded like a standard remake of Robert Clouse's

post-holocaust flick *Ultimate Warrior* (1975), but soon found it was much worse than I'd expected.

Toorop (Vin Diesel, *Pitch Black*, *xXx*) is a reluctant hero, press-ganged by Russian baddie Gorsky (Gérard Depardieu in a lame cameo) into escorting convent raised Aurora (Mélanie Thierry, *Chrysalis*) to New York. His mission is hindered or sometimes aided by the girl's chaperone/guardian Sister Rebeka (Michelle Yeoh, of *Sunshine*, *Silver Hawk*, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, *Wing Chun*).

Charlotte Rampling is the predatory high priestess of religious cult Noelites, keen to see Aurora fulfil their apocalyptic prophesy, and Lambert Wilson does his usual loony Frenchman shtick as scientist Darquandier, seemingly intent on using virginal Aurora's miracle pregnancy to solve his own problems.

With parkour gangs adding physical stunts to spectacular CGI effects, the marked contrast of Russian poverty and anarchy with hi-tech gizmos and designer décor in the American metro sprawl, this offers plenty of hectic detail in varied backdrops, yet its action sequences are so unexciting that its only fair to warn viewers that numerous fist/gunfights displayed here are so obviously derivative they might cause drowsiness. A lamentable smash-and-grab raid on the museum of sci-fi clichés, there's no genuine drama or intrigue to be found in the 80 minutes runtime.



Recalling the brightly colourful live-action cartoon styling of *Dick Tracy* (1990), and staging its lightweight plotline like *The Jetsons* meets *Wacky Racers* gone wrong, the Wachowski brothers' **Speed Racer** (10 November) serves up a few mildly humorous visual gags (flicker-book pony on a racetrack hoarding, toweringly vertical integration of a factory production line), but is a generally tiresome, gutless movie, one that lacks anything of greater appeal than some bland retro designs for a breezy anime homage. Wasting a potentially great cast (Susan Sarandon as Racer's mom

and Christina Ricci as sweetheart Trixie, in particular, are given nothing to do), it focuses on the same old coming-of-age storyline with family troubles between a wayward son and his brashly intolerant father, that we've seen and endured a thousand times. *Speed Racer* – sadly, yes, that's his name – is portrayed by Emile Hirsch (*Alpha Dog*, *Girl Next Door*), who does what he can with such a mediocre role. John Goodman fares little better as Pops and even Matthew Fox (TV series *Lost*) as masked Racer X, brings no sense of depth, and certainly no mystery, to his part as both prodigal son and secondary protagonist. No doubt co-directors Andy and Larry hoped their film's fast-moving imagery would be dazzling and beguiling to fans of *Scalextric* and perhaps even grand prix followers, but despite some unexpected changes of settings and scenery races have a tawdry repetitiveness that soon becomes exasperatingly dull viewing. Furthermore, the film's crudely Nietzschean bombast, emphasising that competitively engineered machinery hardly matters on such potentially deadly racetracks, as even 'fascist' laws of physics can be overcome by heroic willpower alone, fires up only viewers' annoyance not our imagination. Last year, we might have assumed that *Transformers* was created to sell cars and toys, but here the car is star, and this film is simply a protracted advert for a Christmas toy.

off his trolley, but cannot resist an appeal for help from Inspector Ho (Andy On), on the trail of missing officer. Bun's claim of seeing people's inner personalities sounds like blatantly supernatural ability, but its handling remains ambiguous to the last. Simultaneous on-screen appearances by a murderer's split personalities is a means of skillfully generating unease/suspense that's even more surprisingly powerful, here, than William Hurt's alter-ego for Kevin Costner's sociopath in Hollywood psycho-chiller *Mr Brooks*. Titular super-cop Bun playfully mixes scenes of poignant farce with mesmerising demonstrations of crime-solving insight that seem genuinely profound but are delivered on the psychological knife-edge of absurdity. Bun chats to his 'dead' wife May (portrayed by two different actresses), whose 'imaginary-friend' version (Flora Chan) is unlike the tough-minded career woman (Kelly Lin), who's actually just estranged from her delusional husband. Bun asserts it's necessary to apply emotion not logic to solving crimes, and he proves a point about shrewd instinctive leaps by breaking cases from glancing at newspaper headlines instead of studying hard evidence. Not to be outdone by the self-consciously 'immersive' empathic techniques of FBI consultant Will Graham (of *Manhunter*, and *Red Dragon* remake), half-crazy but unwaveringly determined Bun is fond of sudden headbutts, mimicry of binge-eating disorders, driving without a licence, and eager to go alone into the woods and risk burying himself alive in pursuit of truth and justice! Unerringly bold in theatrical orchestration and creative edits, interweaving 'psychic' visions with character studies of psychosis and intuitive genius, *Mad Detective* never once collapses into irrationality, maintaining its clarity of purpose throughout a gun-smoke and broken mirrors finale in a room where half the people visible aren't there, really. The prolific Johnnie To made media-savvy *Breaking News*, brilliant noir *PTU*, westernised triads clash *Exiled*, and the unconventional comicbook adventure *Heroic Trio*. With each picture he revives mouldy genre clichés, breathes electrifying new life into familiar material and challenges orthodox critical thinking about the mainstream and subgenre cinemas. Let's hope he stays in Hong Kong and doesn't throw away his talent in Hollywood, as poor John Woo did.



In recent years, Adrian Monk and Frank Black have revolutionised both comedic and dramatic roles for TV sleuths, but **Mad Detective** (3 November) reaches a new level of eccentric weirdness. Directed by Johnnie To and Wai Ka Fai (who collaborated on stylised actioner *Fulltime*

Killer), the remarkable success of *Mad Detective* (aka: *Sum taam*) combines virtuoso filmmaking techniques with the superb characterisation of an unhinged ex-cop, Kwai Bun (Ching Wan Lau). Bun was sacked when he cut off his own ear. Five years later, he's off his meds, seemingly

Mutant Popcorn Nick Lowe



95% of the time, we're right to be exasperated by Not Science Fiction – that distinctive subgenre of sf that is defined exclusively by being Not the notion of sf entertained by people who won't be doing with science fiction. (Specifically, it tends Not to be about "robots and spaceships".) And it's true that, for the most part, people who exhibit disdain for sf, whether as authors or as critics, tend to come spectacularly unstuck when they try to discuss it, let alone actually create it. There are reflexes of the trained sf reader and writer that are extremely difficult to learn without the years of immersive study that normally precede, and NSF writers tend to be impatient with the tropes of scientific plausibility, and with technical research in general; to overrate their own invention and originality, turning a blind eye to superior existing implementations of the wheel they think they've just invented; and to say very silly things on the promotional tour about what science fiction is and does.

But Sturgeon's law was coined to apply to everything as well as to sf; and if 95% of NSF is Sturgeon-compliant, that still means that for every 19 *Children of Men* (the novel, not the rather more interesting film) something will still come along to remind you that, at its best, NSF can be every bit as intelligent and moving as what it's Not. After all, NSF authors tend to have long and wide experience in non-genre writing; to be resistant to some of the learned narrative shorthands of genre storytelling; to give interesting weight to aspects of prose, character,

and novelistic technique that writers in an essentially fan-driven market are not strongly encouraged to prioritise; and to be unencumbered by inhibitions about narrowness and specificity of readership. These are all, potentially at least, good things, particularly when coupled to a healthy respect for the genre and values of sf proper.

Both the weaknesses and the strengths of NSF are richly on view in Fernando Meirelles' **Blindness**, which sees the Lusophone world's top filmmaker tackle its greatest living man of letters, in the *City of God* director's adaptation of Nobel laureate José Saramago's 1995 NSF novel of a mystery global pandemic of white-sight. This is of course in itself a premise that could only be mounted today in NSF, having been put permanently off-limits in sf proper since it was used up in 1951 in a book everyone on earth is assumed to have read. But while Meirelles' film version is clearly aware of *The Day of the Triffids*, it uses its own source novel's indifference to genre as a warrant to reclaim for a different era what is after all an absolute blinder of a premise, while at the same time subtly critiquing the narrative simplicities of the traditional sf apocalypse. Wyndham's plucky band of sighted survivors are reduced to one: Julianne Moore (never better) as the mysteriously immune omega lady banged up with the sightless who finds it safer to pretend to be blind. The whole scenario offers an amazing gallery of film-making opportunities, to which Meirelles rises with the technical

ingenuity you'd expect: whited-out PoV shots, a Gilliamesque scene played out entirely in sound effects on a black screen, fight sequences and sex scenes between characters who can't see one another, and some dazzlingly staged massed action.

Saramago has, it's fair to say, a pretty distinctive authorial voice, which the film has tried to incorporate by assigning slabs of it to the Danny Glover character, mostly in voiceover. The effect is more stylised than convincing, but effective as a reminder that what we're watching is a highly novelistic and authored fable rather than a Hollywood disaster tale. Certainly you couldn't really mistake Saramago's novel for a genre exercise, written as it is in his characteristic page-long paragraphs of huge paratactic sentences and unpunctuated run-on dialogue, and entirely eschewing the novelistic pampersments of named characters and settings. (One of the novel's virtuosités, mercifully unproblematic for film, is its unobtrusive textual management of a large cast identifiable only by wordy descriptive tags like "the girl with the dark glasses" and "the wife of the first man to go blind".) Meirelles' film reproduces this sense of everywhere and nowhere by being a promiscuously international project, a Canadian-Brazilian-Japanese production set in an artfully transnational global any-city stitched together from locations in Toronto (already in effect the cinema's iconic could-be-anywhere) with bits of Sao Paulo and Montevideo, and featuring a large polyglot cast and a huge opening crawl of international coproducer credits.

Meirelles' close adaptation is scripted by the interesting Canadian actor-director Don McKellar, whose own *Last Night* attempted a similar kind of multithreaded apocalyptic fable with a provocative indifference to the actual science-fictional elements in favour of a purely dramatic exploration of the thought experiment. Like *Last Night*, *Blindness* attempts neither to rationalise nor to plot a solution to its end-of-the-world scenario, and indeed both novel and film enjoy piquing our disaster-plot expectations of the familiar. The can-do problem-solving attitude of universal resourcefulness ingrained in both sf and Hollywood is repeatedly thwarted; this is a disaster movie that takes it for granted that people in general would be completely hopeless in a real global meltdown, making for an effective counterblast to the cosy-catastrophism and

wartime spirit of *Triffids*. One especially daring novelistic move is that the actual global catastrophe happens off-camera, unseen. The novel shapes its story in three cleverly articulated acts, much the longest of which tracks the descent into the dark of the motley first-act cast of early infectees as they find themselves interned together in a quarantine hospital left increasingly to its own brutal devices as the unseen world outside disintegrates around them. Only in the final hundred pages does the novel whisk away the lid and allow the internees at last to escape into a world now plunged into unseeing and anarchy. In the

novel, this is a phenomenally powerful effect; but the viewer of the film version has to sit through a very long and grim middle act wondering all the time about what's happening in the real plot outside, and it's hard to say that the incident and pacing really satisfies. In the novel, the consequences of just-shoot-the-bad-guy solutions are more persuasively thought through than is possible in the briskness of film, where questions beginning "Why doesn't she just...?" crowd in more insistently as we see the story played out in live action. But perhaps that's our problem, a symptom of another kind of blindness.

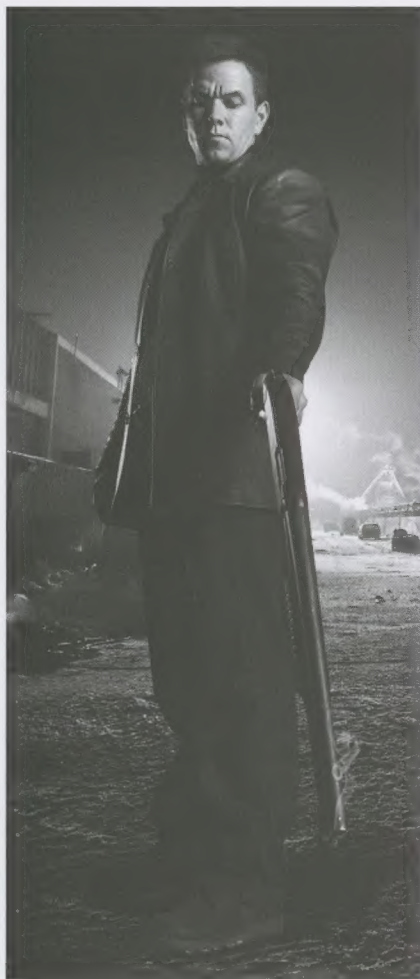


Escape from a sightless prison community into the post-apocalypse light is the theme of another respectful literary adaptation, albeit from a very different quarter of the market, in *Monster House* director Gil Kenan's live-action debut **City of Ember**, adapted by Tim Burton regular Caroline Thompson from Jeanne DuPrau's evocative conceptual-breakthrough juvenile about a centuries-old subterranean city sputtering into darkness. You can tell from the specs alone that this is another of Walden Media's canny acquisitions from the tweenage school-library shelves; and Kenan's involvement is something of a coup. One of the least annoying Walden efforts to date, it's refreshingly free of the supplementary familial baggage and sentiment that so often derails these projects' worthy intentions, and allows its terrific young leads – Saoirse Ronan from *Atonement* and Harry Treadaway of the *Brothers of the Head* Treadaways – to carry the story more-or-less by the book. Typically of its kind, it quietly upcasts the kids (at 24, Treadaway is not only a decade older than Ronan but exactly double the age of his character in the book), but there's a welcome resistance to teenage romantic business in favour of an authentic enthusiasm for exploration and rulebreaking. Ember itself is beautifully realised in the spectacular Belfast-shot sets, and the film's residual weaknesses are essentially those of the book: a fairly minimal puzzle-game plot with a walkthrough document to be reconstructed and acted on, and an ending that (like the novel's) leaves the biggest questions unanswered for the sequels that seem unlikely now to make the transition from option to screen. It's especially bad timing that the same plot has already been seen earlier in the year with *Wall•E*, even down to the self-activating mechanical ending (the film's one major attempt to beef up the white-knuckle action at the climax).

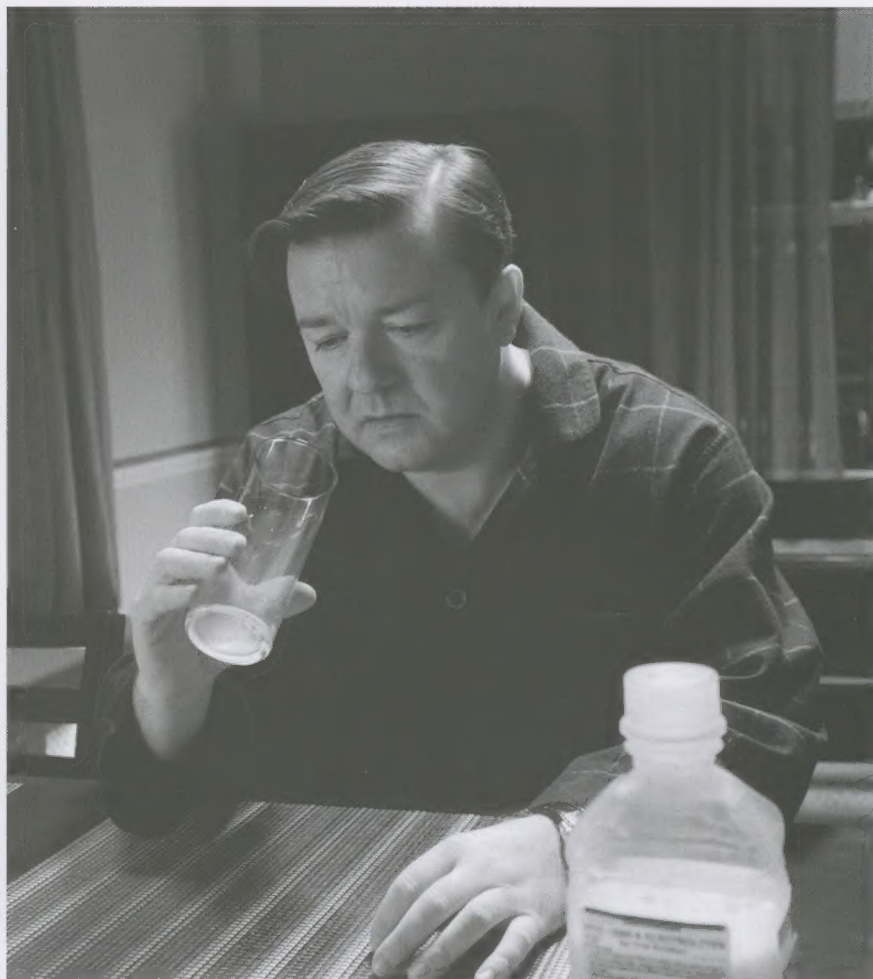


In one of those weird conjunctions that tease out subtexts you wouldn't otherwise pick up on, **Igor** uses the exact same plot – bringing light to a dark city whose benign-seeming overlord is secretly the propagator of the very darkness that keeps his people oppressed – as a gleeful allegory of Hollywood politics. "All Igors are forced to serve evil scientists. But I never wanted to be an Igor; I wanted to be an evil scientist." For it's the fate of Igors to be born into a rigid caste of generically-named technicians in a town where only above-the-line creatives are celebrities, competing with one another annually at the globally livecast Evil Science Fair where the most horrifying invention will be used to hold the world to ransom. But one hunchbacked henchperson dreams of breaking through the iron ceiling and turning the evil science industry into a meritocracy, where the narcissistic frauds who currently rule the roost will cede place to the true talent behind the scenes. To this end, Igor achieves the evil scientist's grail of creating life – only to be sucked into a Pygmalionic relationship with his own creation ("Eva") after his attempts to corrupt her innate goodness go horribly awry and she turns instead into a stagestruck diva who in her turn redeems him through the power of luvviness.

It's a surprisingly complex film, which has to tie itself into a knot or two to make its rather effective allegory pass for logic on the more humdrum level of plot, and with a hefty lashing of what is essentially junior torture-porn under the licence of cartoon violence and old-movie horror. But the thrust of the allegory is that the evil science of filmmaking doesn't have to be a brutal exercise in the creation of monsters to terrorise the global population into funding their own spiritual oppression. When Igor finally overthrows the established order and turns on the lights, he replaces the feudal political structure with a republic and gets installed by vote of the people as President Igor. Hooray! – cue chorus of blind orphans singing "I Can See Clearly Now" (I'm not making this up). With no trace of irony, the production itself has contracted out all its actual animation to a Parisian company. Based, no doubt, in Notre Dame.



The science of evil is more solemnly addressed in **Max Payne**, a stylishly mounted adaptation of the unusually strongly-plotted third-person shooter game, tracing its loner detective hero's quest for the killers of his family, on a trail of secrets and conspiracies centred around a drug that induces visions of cg Valkyries which may or may not be real. (I've seen the film and reread the script, but still remain little the wiser.) The corridor-prowling and bullet-time gameplay of the original are stylishly reproduced, but what for its interactive genre is a fairly sophisticated investigative storyline creaks quite badly when scaled up to the big screen, with a limp, stop-start structure and a lot of pretty boilerplate scenes born ultimately of the necessary shorthands of game narrative, which here force a disproportionate reliance on primitive fears of home invasion, mugging, tattoos, drug crime, and pagan conspiracy driven by the military-industrial complex. A post-credit teaser offers the cheeky prospect of a sequel, which I fear promises to be Min Fun.



Sometimes, though, seeing things can be good for you. That at least is the message of David Koepp's **Ghost Town**, a curious off-road career swerve into mainstream supernatural rom-com by an AA-list writer and occasional director noted for almost anything but. Koepp has risen to the top of the foodchain principally as a safe pair of hands for hire in the writing of very, very big studio pictures for Spielberg and others, and his own occasional directorial outings have been things like *Stir of Echoes* and *Secret Window*. But *Ghost Town* is nothing much like any of the things he's become employable for: a completely by-numbers heartwarmer about a misanthropic dentist who sees dead people after a hospital oopsie and falls reluctantly for Téa Leoni's widowed Egyptologist thanks to a shared interest in badly decayed teeth. It's a bit of a mystery why Koepp wanted to saddle himself with the challenge of making Ricky Gervais work as a romantic lead in a formulaic studio picture, after *Night at the Museum* demonstrated disastrously that Gervais' style of performance, and particularly of comic performance, is

jarringly difficult to mesh with mainstream Hollywood comic acting. But it has to be said that both director and star make a pretty good fist of it, enthusiastically stomping on the English as fat, ugly, joyless, nasty, emotionally retarded life-haters ("That little British heart of yours finally started beating, and now you want to go back to your cave and crush it with a rock") whose only chance at redemption is that they can on occasion be quite amusing company, even if their humour is a bit odd and you're not actually sure whether it's supposed to be funny at all. It's a fairly deathly film sporadically resuscitated by some quite funny moments and lines, but there's an interesting and possibly unintended undercurrent of hollowness and despair, as the stiffly Hollywood characterisations of the supporting cast collide in turn with the tonal iceberg of Gervais' attitude and performance. For a filmmaker whose career has been built largely on doing the exact opposite of this, it's an intriguing venture into Not Rom-Com, a genre of which one could stand to see a little more.

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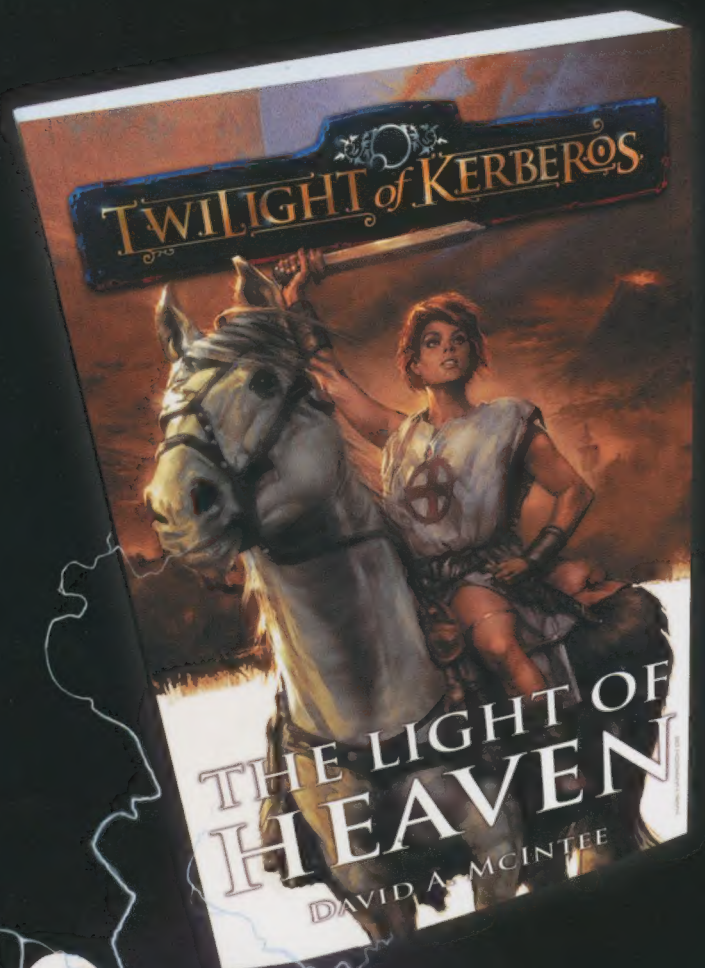
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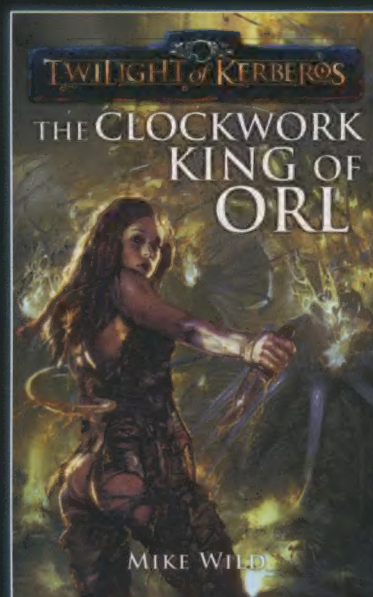
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